

M.D. SNODGRASS:

THE FOUNDER OF THE ALASKA STATE FAIR

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M.D. SNODGRASS:
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A

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By

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Abstract

This dissertation presents the life of M.D. Snodgrass as an example of how the Alaskan frontier transformed an unremarkable middle aged migrant into a socially prominent civic leader. The life of M.D. Snodgrass exemplifies how American frontier society provides ordinary people with exceptional opportunities to flourish and prosper. One of the end results of Snodgrass's taking advantage of Alaskan frontier opportunity was the Alaska State Fair.

The dissertation divides the life of Snodgrass into four phases with the following findings: 1) The first thirty-one years of Snodgrass's life was spent outside of Alaska. His early life in Kansas demonstrates: the forces which formed Snodgrass, the absence of noteworthy activities and the habits he embraced that would remain constant in his long life. 2) The second thesis section documents: how upon arrival in Alaska he was immediately confronted with challenges and opportunities in the wilderness that built his self-confidence, and how he devoted most of the last six decades of his life to advancement of agriculture in Alaska. 3) The third part addresses his political career, with the following observations: the unsettled frontier society had no established upper class and he became socially mobile; being present at the creation of a political system allowed him to attain extraordinary prominence rapidly; and he learned to take risks, to lose and yet keep trying. 4) The final phase demonstrates that by definition a frontier society lacks institutions, and Snodgrass seized the opportunity to be a participant in the creation of two colleges and became the founding figure of the Alaska State Fair.

The author concludes that had M.D. Snodgrass never left Kansas he probably would never have been a representative, senator, college trustee, founder of experiment stations, state presidential elector, or the founder of a state fair. A normal individual can accomplish exceptional feats in a frontier setting where the open environment encourages the development of human potential.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

M.D. Snodgrass:

The Founder of the Alaska State Fair

On a frontier you can throw off the past, the external limits that have been holding you back. . . . On a frontier, you enjoy easy entry, less competition, and greater odds of success. . . . Frontiers stretch people. - Judith Kleinfeld¹,

Far better it is to dare mighty things, to win glorious triumphs, even though checkered by failure, than to take rank with those poor spirits who neither enjoy much nor suffer much, because they live in the gray twilight that knows not victory nor defeat. - President Theodore Roosevelt.²

Milton D. and Margaret Snodgrass are buried in the Palmer Cemetery. Palmer did not exist when they first moved north as newlyweds in 1907. Even by 1917, after having five children (Roland, William, Margaret, Agnes and Mary) in Alaska they still thought of Kansas as home. Eventually that changed.

M.D. Snodgrass died on December 1, 1967 at St. Joseph's Hospital in Fairbanks. He and Margaret had moved to that city's Pioneer Home about a year before he died. His body was transported to Palmer, the town that had displaced Kansas as his home and became his final resting place. The Alaskan frontier had transformed him from a young newly married adventurer to an Alaskan pioneer leader and settler. Even the church where friends and family last viewed him represented part of his legacy to Alaska.



Figure 1: Milton D. Snodgrass, circa 1907. Photo provided by Snodgrass Family.



Figure 2: Margaret Snodgrass, circa 1907. Photo provided by the Snodgrass Family.

His funeral took place at the United Protestant Church (Presbyterian) in Palmer, an entirely log structure built on land donated to the church by M.D. He and Margaret had provided the first minister of that church, the Rev. B.J. Bingle, with his first dinner in Palmer on May 6, 1935³. The Snodgrasses had remained members from the founding of the church. Even on a cold December day the funeral was well attended. In addition to pallbearers comprised of relatives, there were honorary pallbearers who represented well known families in Palmer: James Wilson, Jalmar Kerttula, Ted Buzby, Leo Lucas, William Zahradnicek and Max Sherrod. M.D.'s net of social acquaintances had been cast wide in his ninety-one years. The Pioneers of Alaska handled the internment ceremony.

Margaret did not outlive M.D. by much and within a year she also died and was buried in Palmer. Four of their five children: Roland, Margaret, Agnes and Mary eventually also died in Palmer. The fifth child, Col. William Snodgrass, moved to Oregon. M.D. Snodgrass and his children had come to regard Palmer as home even though none of them was born there and he did not die there. In addition to his five children and wife, he was survived by 14 grandchildren and 23 great-grandchildren.

A stable marriage and frontier opportunities allowed M.D. Snodgrass to prosper. His death was considered a newsworthy story in the Anchorage Daily Times which detailed his sixty years of service to the fair, Alaskan farming, the legislature, and the university. He made significant contributions to agriculture and education in Alaska and he founded the Alaska State Fair.

The life of M.D. Snodgrass is a confirmation of the theory that frontiers provide ordinary people with extraordinary opportunities. His life confirms that ordinary people,

once given a chance, can prosper in a frontier in ways unimaginable in an established society. The life of Snodgrass also illustrates the natural human tendency to cling to the familiar patterns of life even if one is in a position to be creative.

The French philosophe Jean Jacques Rousseau once proclaimed “Man is born free, yet everywhere he is in chains.”⁴ The life of M.D. Snodgrass is a testament to the seemingly irresistible allure of the familiar chains of established human institutions. Snodgrass spent the first one-third of his life learning about chains of nineteenth century American midwestern thought and culture. He became a federal employee at the United States Post Office, a captain in the United States Army, a college graduate, a Presbyterian, and a Republican. He then left the comfortable institutions of Kansas for the wilderness of Alaska which lacked these familiar pillars of society. He spent the last two thirds of his life in Alaska transplanting what he had learned in Kansas. While the opportunity of a frontier life in Alaska offered him personal mobility, he did not attempt to create a unique lifestyle but rather a copy of the place he had left.

Milton Snodgrass was not an original thinker, yet in Alaska he became creative. The Alaskan frontier made him a different person. In Kansas he seemed to be a careful man, yet in Alaska he became a risk taker. He was a loyalist to a social system that worked and he understood how to replicate it. Had he never left Kansas he likely would have died an unremarkable solid citizen. However, when in the Alaskan frontier he rose to leadership positions and helped mold early Alaska. He did not use the power he acquired to promote new or revolutionary social goals; to the contrary, he reinstated the familiar ones. His tendency to adopt familiar institutions was not unusual and explains why Alaska closely

resembles the rest of the United States. When he died his most tangible legacy was the Alaska State Fair which, not surprisingly, resembled a midwestern fair.

Psychologist Judith Kleinfeld has argued that the Alaskan frontier changes people, “The Alaskan North, I argue, has been a sparsely populated and transient geographic region with a cultural ethos that celebrates stereotyped, romantic images of the American frontier such as individuality, freedom, pioneering, and opportunity. Migrants who came to Alaska with such a ‘frontier’ mindset saw themselves as obtaining greater opportunity, enjoying wider experience in new and more demanding tasks and roles, making more of their talents, and making more of a difference to their society, than if they had stayed in the more settled regions from which they had come.”⁵ M.D. Snodgrass was a prime example of that thesis. The frontier repeatedly thrust opportunity upon him and he seized those moments. He stumbled many times. In sixty years of promoting farming all across Alaska he endured extended periods of frustration with his government employers and at least two unsuccessful endeavors in private farming. In politics he won two legislative elections and lost at least eight. Even the fair he founded seemed an uncertain proposition when it shut down for five years in World War II, yet he organized its successful revival. In Alaska, Snodgrass had learned to step out of the twilight of life President Theodore Roosevelt described and endure setbacks while attempting great things.

Snodgrass did not come to Alaska as a blank slate. He was an upstanding representative of what any successful society wants from its citizens - he was hardworking, fundamentally honest, and a stable family man. He grew up in rural Indiana and Kansas in farming regions expanding railroad networks served. His eventual involvement with the

Alaska Railroad efforts to recruit farmers for the Alaska railbelt was a natural extension of his own youth. His slow but systematic pursuit of a college degree with limited resources and serious family support obligations gave him a keen appreciation for the value of education in elevating his own ability to earn a decent living. After a brief failed attempt at private farming in Fairbanks his practical recognition of the stability associated with federal employment in Alaska and Kansas became the unwanted mistress to his elusive dreams of prosperity in the private sector.

His successful marriage of sixty years to a librarian and part-time teacher provided him with a stable home and allowed a life of adventurous experiences, which his wife, Margaret, encouraged and even inspired. Margaret Snodgrass spent extended periods of time - sometimes months - separated from M.D. by great geographic distance. M.D.'s pursuit of political and vocational opportunities led to extended stays in Fairbanks, Juneau, Matanuska and the lower contiguous states which would not have been possible had his wife not been willing to manage his family and finances. She always kept the children with her and often worked the farm alone. In a time when Alaska was remote and travel was difficult, Snodgrass managed to spend significant time in Kenai, Kodiak, Fairbanks, Juneau, Matanuska and finally Palmer, leaving Margaret with the children. The family often considered moving back to the contiguous states in their first two decades in Alaska. However, by 1930, it was fairly evident that they had come to regard Alaska as their home.

The key feature of M.D. Snodgrass's personality was his apparent easy-going affability combined with his willingness to try just about anything. He was a "joiner" and the opportunities of the Alaska frontier society of 1907 rewarded the curious like himself. Mr.

and Mrs. Snodgrass were literally deposited on the beach at the edge of the Alaska wilderness and embraced the unknown with an admirable zest for life. He cleared the land for the experiment farms, endured bear attacks, a great volcanic eruption and repeatedly established a home in what had been primeval wilderness. He and his wife had and raised five children far from their families in Kansas and eventually became role models for an Alaska of settler families. The Snodgrass Alaska family came to represent the non-Native Alaskan society that replaced the single miner adventurer culture that dominated the territory at their arrival.

Snodgrass had a passion for the potential for farming in Alaska. As a territorial legislator he had the opportunity to have a significant impact on how Alaska would develop. He was not a very successful legislator and could count few long term legacies from his two brief two-year terms of service. Yet, through those opportunities he was able to contribute to the creation of the University of Alaska and eventually the founding of the State Fair. In the end he recreated many of the chains of civilization that had surrounded his own opportunities in Kansas. He recreated the familiar.

He made a difference, though he was no revolutionary. He was a conservative. The frontier of Alaska provided him with opportunities and he took risks. In fact, he gambled and lost many times: two unsuccessful attempts to be the president of the Alaska College of Agriculture and School of Mines, a failed foray into private farming in Fairbanks, a failed attempt to become a reindeer farmer and multiple lost elections for the territorial legislature.

In Kansas Snodgrass had never attempted to run a college, run for the legislature, start a fair or operate a reindeer farm. Why not? In Kansas he was a poor man from a modest

family trying to obtain an education while making ends meet. Even at the age of thirty-one (when he left for Alaska) it would have been improbable that he ever would have become a viable applicant for a college president or a legislator, and the fairs were already founded. Those real parameters in an established social system limited his options in Kansas. He did not have an apparent objection or resentment to those institutions as they were organized. He diligently participated in and supported the institutions of Kansas without any real expectation that he could ever seriously influence their operation.

The frontier of Alaska, on the other hand, allowed Snodgrass to arrive in a newly forming social order with less competition and greater odds of success. He seized those opportunities, and the frontier stretched him. Alaska allowed him to become the “man in the arena” and he learned to gamble, to lose, and how to get up and try again. When he succeeded he used his success to recreate the very system that had prevented him from similar prosperity in Kansas. It was natural that the most enduring legacy of his successes in Alaska was a fair that strongly resembled the fairs of his mid-western childhood.

1. Judith Kleinfeld, *Go For It!* (Kenmore, Washington: Epicenter Press, 2003), 25.

2. John Bartkett, *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1968), 847.

3. B.J. Bingle, *The First Three Years* (Palmer: B.J. Bingle, 1938), 8-9.

4. Jay Winik, *The Great Upheaval* (New York: Harper Collins, 2007), 32.

5. Judith Kleinfeld, “How the Frontier Imagery of the Alaskan North Shapes the People Who Come,” *The Northern Review* 27 (Fall 2007): 38.

Chapter 2

M.D. Snodgrass

Life Outside Alaska - Unremarkable Stability

The historian, Frederick Jackson Turner declared that the American frontier was the “meeting point between savagery and civilization,” a moving boundary which he defined as the “edge of free land.” He went on to conclude that the most important impact of the American frontier was “the promotion of democracy . . . the frontier is productive of individualism.”¹ Turner asserted that frontier generated democracy and individualism and created a society where, “The most distinctive fact was the freedom of the individual to rise under conditions of social mobility, and whose ambition was the liberty and well-being of the masses.”²

While not necessarily disagreeing with Turner’s thesis, the historian Bernard DeVoto perceived the emergence of two distinct types of frontier “individuals” in the story of the American West. He “believed the West was divided into two main camps: one made up of permanent residents determined to put down lasting roots and build a workable future in the region with a view toward posterity, the other of transients interested only in ‘liquidating the West’s resources.’”³

When M.D. Snodgrass came to the Alaskan frontier in 1907 he was not a noteworthy “individualist” and he did not envision Alaska as a permanent home. The fact that he died a prominent individual in Alaska sixty years later, however, was not surprising. His life confirmed the theories of both DeVoto and Turner. He was a hard worker with ambition and once given an opportunity to demonstrate his potential he stretched himself. The first

thirty-one years of Snodgrass' life made it predictable that once he was placed in the frontier setting of territorial Alaska he would become successful and a man who in DeVoto's view would establish "roots" as opposed to becoming a transient exploiter of resources.

Frederick Jackson Turner first proposed his theories related to American individualism and democracy arising from westward frontier expansion in 1893. He believed the impact of the frontier in American history had come to an end with the settlement of the Pacific Coast.⁴ In fact, the Territory of Alaska was to provide an opportunity to test the frontier theories of Turner and DeVoto. The life of M.D. Snodgrass offers an opportunity to examine the life of one individual who first followed and then caught the wave of the American frontier life. His story presents an opportunity to assess the impact of "frontier" on individual opportunity.

M.D. Snodgrass spent most of his first thirty-one years in Kansas. He was a hard worker, solid citizen, volunteer soldier, public servant and farmer. He was not a "public figure" in Kansas. In Alaska, however, he would become a central figure in several crucial historical events due to the extraordinary opportunities afforded to him in the rapidly changing frontier of Alaska between 1907 and 1967 when he died.

The Midwestern agrarian roots of Snodgrass were his transparent core throughout his long life. In every endeavor: academic, entrepreneurial, political, social, or vocational, his core theme was always the advancement of agriculture. That central orientation can be attributed to the first thirty-one years of his life in Kansas before he came to Alaska.

2.1 Indiana, Kansas and Snodgrass's First Fair

Three months before Custer's famous Last Stand in Montana, Milton D. Snodgrass was born in Jasper County, Indiana on March 14, 1876.⁵ The abbreviation of his first name into his first two initials appears to have been a common practice in his era as many of his contemporaries in Alaska did the same thing before World War I. He claimed to recall being at the Reneseller, Indiana Fair when he was four and being inspired by "horse racing and sulky racing, saddle races and a balloon ascension . . . "⁶

Historian of the American West, Richard W. Etulain, wrote about a correlation between railroad expansion and the population explosion of Kansas in the 1870s and 1880s.⁷ Historian Walter Prescott Webb added that railroads alone did not open the plains states to settlement; in fact he declared farmers did not begin to arrive "until after 1875. Not until then could the land of the Plains be *fenced*, and without fences agriculture is impossible in a country occupied by cattle."⁸ It was in that period Snodgrass' parents joined the exodus and moved from Indiana to a place near the town of Little River in Rice County, Kansas. In 1952 M.D. Snodgrass wrote that his family arrived in Kansas in October of 1881.⁹ They were not alone - the population of Kansas tripled between 1875 and 1888 (528, 349 to 1,518,552).¹⁰ By 1885 almost ten percent of the population of Kansas (100,271 people) had, like Snodgrass, been born in Indiana.¹¹

The Snodgrass family came in a covered wagon, not a train.¹² Little River is located near the center of Kansas, about fifty miles north of Wichita. It is set on the Little Arkansas River which begins barely ten miles north of Little River.

Seventy-two years later M.D. would reflect on his early Kansas years with some

nostalgia even for the hardships. He wrote of the classic three mile walks to school and declared simply “poverty always attended me.” This was not an exaggeration, and poverty was not unusual for most people in that time and place. Historian Michael McGerr provided an insight into midwestern American life at the end of the nineteenth century that confirmed Snodgrass’ own recollections of his early years:

All of them, even the best paid workers, lived circumscribed, vulnerable lives, constrained by low pay and limited opportunity, and menaced by unemployment, ill health, and premature death. The central fact of working class life was limited resources. In 1900, wage workers in manufacturing earned an average of \$435 for the year; in contrast, middle class clerical workers in railroad and manufacturing firms averaged \$1,011, more than twice as much. The lowest working-class wages were low indeed: in 1900, anthracite coal miners averaged \$340 for the year; domestics, \$240; *and agricultural laborers, only \$178 with room and board.*¹³

The Snodgrass family lived in a 20'x40' sod house for two years and they ate a lot of corn.¹⁴ The town of Little River was historically considered to be closer to the “wheat belt” than the “corn belt” of Kansas. Ecological historian James C. Malin places Little River a little bit beyond the western edge of the Kansas corn belt.¹⁵ Nevertheless, as Snodgrass described it, corn was omnipresent: “corn for crop, corn for baking, corn bread, . . . regular fare was corn meal mush and milk, dried corn and homemade hominy”. The apparent tedium of his early diet did no serious damage, for he lived to be 91.¹⁶

While the hardship in comparison to modern American life is difficult to imagine, historian Richard W. Etulain has noted that Kansas homesteader life in sod houses was often understood to be the beginning of a better life:

These problems, real and dramatic as they were, can be overplayed. A majority of the settlers stayed on, with many becoming successful homesteaders. Even though some newcomers were alienated by the flat,

treeless plains, others delighted in it. . . . Moreover a homesteader could begin with little capital. It usually took about \$500 to \$600 annually to sustain a farm family [in the 1880's], but a bachelor from Pennsylvania with less than \$100 settled in Kansas and built his sod house for less than \$10. Others got by on even less. Within a few years, after much hard work, economizing, and help from Mother Nature, they were able to erect frame houses.¹⁷

Although the period from 1880 through 1885 was considered to be a part of the “generally prosperous” years for Kansas farmers, tragedy struck the Snodgrass family.¹⁸ M.D.’s father died in 1884 when M.D. was only eight years old. The short duration (just over two years) on the farm, even in that prosperous period, before moving into town was not unusual. Historian Malin wrote that the new migrants who became farmer operators failed at a rate of 60% or more during their first ten years on the soil.¹⁹

The Snodgrass family left the farm and moved into Little River where it obtained five lots and farmed the property. M.D.’s older brothers attended high school. However, in 1885 a ten year long national (and to a certain degree international) depression overtook his life and stalled his opportunities for early schooling.²⁰ Family finances were tight, so in 1887 he had to drop out of school at the age of eleven in order to work part-time as a janitor at a local school. His formal education did not resume until he enrolled in college seven years later.

It was not an unusual scenario. As Progressive Era historian Michael McGerr noted, hardship and low income in rural America in 1900 meant that “education often had to give way to work. Farm parents were more likely to take their children out of school. . . . In many farm families, a sixteen year-old would never have gone back at all.”²¹ In the interim young Snodgrass was hired out as a day laborer on farms up to ten miles from his house for fifty

cents a day. Forty years later he still remembered these years as a time when he perhaps worked hardest for the least compensation, performing “chores, hauling feed, manure, feeding stock, milking cows and general work.”²² Seven decades later he recalled that he worked side by side with adults who did the same work for one dollar a day. He grew up fast: “I worked hard on a farm there until I was a man grown . . . and then when I was too old by ordinary standards to go back to school I went down to Manhattan and started my preparatory work.”²³ Twice, when he was 15 and again when he was 17, he had been ready to return to high school but “sickness in the family” forced him to work instead.²⁴ He would remain a “worker” all his life. Historian Michael McGerr described the shift of American cultural values at the turn of the century by observing that “prior to 1880 the . . . main business of life was living . . . The main business of life now is pleasure.”²⁵

Snodgrass was never someone who showed a strong inclination for pleasure. Arguably he did many things that made life more pleasurable for others, but his own work ethic seemed to be rooted in what McGerr described as the “life of living.”

2.2 College and Early Adulthood

Snodgrass recognized the importance of education in spite of his limited access to it in his early years. In 1894, he managed to enroll in the Kansas State Agricultural College in Manhattan, Kansas, located about seventy-five miles northeast of Little River. M.D. had “two distantly related cousins who had graduated there.”²⁶ His mother also moved to Manhattan, bought a house and rented rooms to other students. Because he had had no formal schooling since the age of 11, he had to take preparatory courses, which were problematic:

Tuesday morning after chapel I received my examination report: Passed reading, writing and geography. Failures: spelling, grammar and arithmetic. Assignment made me late to my first class. My heart nearly failed me as I approached my class room door. I came near turning back. After three attempts to turn the latch, the door opened, and the room with 44 desks seemed packed full of grown-ups. A hand raised on the back row of seats, motioned me to come. The room was now full. About me were people of my age and many much older. To my right was a bright eyed, round faced German of 19 years. Men and women ranging from 18 to 45 years old, common farm folks who had been denied the privilege [sic] of schooling. They were a serious bunch, and I will never forget them. Old maids and bachelors were well represented. The average age was perhaps 24 years old, and practically all were from the country or very small towns. Acquaintances were quickly made. Most of these were housed in private homes and eating in small boarding clubs.²⁷

His college career was a long process. After many lengthy interruptions, he finally graduated twelve years later in 1906.²⁸ College was too costly for him to complete his studies in a more timely fashion. There was a two year hiatus after his first semester and he spent several winter terms working as a farm laborer rather than pursuing his classes.

In 1896, when Republican William McKinley defeated Democrat William Jennings Bryan for the presidency, Snodgrass returned to the college for a second semester while he worked there as a part-time janitor. Decades later he would remember that time as “These wonderful days. Entirely different from life on the farm.”²⁹

Living on a farm in Kansas in the 1890s placed Snodgrass squarely in the midst of the “progressive” political traditions of the American West. No single definition can adequately match every circumstance, but historian Michael McGerr offers a general overview of what midwestern progressives searched for, namely, “Progressives wanted not only to use the state to regulate the economy; strikingly, they intended nothing less than to transform other Americans, to remake the nation’s feuding, polyglot population in their own middle-class

image.”³⁰

The ideas associated with progressive American politics would be reflected in Snodgrass’ own Alaskan political activities in later years. As Richard Etulain wrote, “Progressivism surfaced in several other western states as well. In Kansas, progressives rallied to pass regulations on corporate stocks, elect reform governors, and support forward-looking senators.”³¹ In Alaska Snodgrass came to be affiliated with the populist Republican maverick, James Wickersham.

He would refer to 1896 as his “freshman year,” implying that the 1894 studies were either entirely preparatory or too brief to amount to a real beginning; 1896 was also the beginning of an enduring romance. In 1952 he recalled that in his “freshman year, about May basket time, very fortunately for me, I met a very attractive darkeyed [sic] young school marm, fresh from country teaching . . .”³² Like his college career, his courtship was a slow but deliberate process. He married Margaret Jane Minis in Kansas on June 8, 1907, eleven years after they had first met.³³

In 1897 M.D. found a job with the Manhattan, Kansas United States Post Office, which he described as a “miracle” because he was able to earn \$40.00 per month.³⁴ It was nearly twice as much income as he had been accustomed to and some benefits were also provided. It was also the beginning of a long civil service career.

On April 25, 1898 the United States Congress declared war on Spain and the Spanish-American War began.³⁵ On May 22, 1898 M.D. volunteered to join the United States Army. His rush to join the army placed him squarely in what historian Malin described as mainstream Kansas society: “The complex of attitudes associated with the Civil

War tradition - patriotism - attained, almost if not quite, the status of a secular religion. So far as theology in the conventional sense was concerned, to be sure, Kansans were overwhelmingly Protestant, not Puritan, in any legitimate sense of that much abused word.”³⁶

Snodgrass was always proud of his military service, and always referred to it in any biographical summation of his life. During the war he became a part of “Company M, 22nd Kansas Volunteers” which was “mustered” on June 5, 1898 but apparently not sent far.³⁷ He served as a private³⁸ just a few months until November 3, 1898. In that time he gained thirty pounds. When he entered the Army he had weighed 156 pounds, by the time he returned to civilian life he weighed 186 pounds. He came out of the service a fully grown man.

He was unable to return to his former job at the post office which went “out the window” because his former supervisor had been sent to the Kansas State Mental Institution while Snodgrass had been in the Army.³⁹ He eventually followed up on his military service by joining the Kansas National Guard, where he served from 1901 through 1907 when he moved to Alaska. The first three years he served at the rank of 2nd Lieutenant and then was promoted to Captain for the last three years in Company I of the 1st Kansas Infantry. In Alaska, he seriously considered re-enlistment in the Army when America entered World War I, but didn’t because he was deemed too old.

Upon returning from the Spanish American War, he also resumed his courtship with Margaret who was working as a student assistant librarian. She advanced in her work while he pursued his studies and became what he described as “Kansas State Librarian” in 1907 when they finally married.⁴⁰ Without his post office job he was forced to return to farm labor in 1899 while periodically returning to college to pursue his bachelor of science degree

in animal husbandry. He later regarded his resumption of work on a wheat farm as somewhat providential: "My return to the farm put strange ideas in my head. Maybe I belonged on the farm . . ." ⁴¹

On October 10, 1902 M.D. obtained an appointment as secretary of the Civil Service Board in Kansas. In 1905 he briefly contemplated switching his studies from animal husbandry to medicine, having worked nine months as a night attendant with an "eye, ears, nose and throat specialist named Dr. Ross." However, he concluded that "such was not a life for me." ⁴²

2.3 Always a Farmer in Sentiment

Although M.D.'s own recollections would vary in his old age, it appears that he graduated from Kansas State College in 1906. Graduation was not a common feat in that era. Snodgrass described his course of studies as consisting of ". . . taking General Science Course and the Agricultural Course and other special work in the Sciences. Graduatin [sic] in Agricultural Course, taking Animal Husbandry as my major." ⁴³ He also took "the full military course offered in the Kansas College and made my commission in the Cadet Corps" which seemed to coincide with his service in the Kansas National Guard where he had attained the rank of captain. ⁴⁴

Snodgrass worked as an Assistant in Crop Production at the Kansas Experiment Station during his senior year. ⁴⁵ It was the beginning of a long and varied career with agricultural experiment stations. He later wrote that "1905-1906 back to college and senior year, was the happiest and busiest year of my life." Apparently the wonderful year of 1896 had been eclipsed. ⁴⁶

Animal husbandry seemed to be the focal point of studies in his senior year:

My senior year was devoted to Agricultural subjects. I made the best of every opportunity. Stock judging, denied me in science studies, was my favorite. Studies in breeds of all kinds of livestock was very interesting. I made first place in horse and swine judging teams, a \$25.00 gold medal Horse Head, and a pure bred Chesterwhite Gilt was my prize in swine judging.

At the first public sale of Aberdeen-Angus cattle at K.S.A.C. I bid on a yearling heifer that appealed to me. After the sale a farmer offered me a substantial sum for my bargain. We compromised by his offering to care for the heifer for one-half the increase in calves, and a return of the cow when I was in a position to take over. . . . My gold medal Horse Head was stolen from my baggage in a stock car while I was picking up milking Shorthorn hard for the Matanuska Experiment Station in 1919.⁴⁷

In his very busy senior year, Snodgrass also made a brief foray into the world of journalism, “Senior Ag boys organized and published ‘Kansas Agriculturalist’, in addition to a very heavy course of study. I held some position, associate editor, I think. That gave me some insight into the news paper business, also a chance to write for publication. Two years after coming to Kodiak I received word that the Agriculturalist was sold and combined with ‘Kansas Farmer’ one of Capper’s publications, and received a check for \$50 for my \$10 share of stock in the ‘Agriculturalist’ Company.”⁴⁸

The college provided M.D. with his first post graduate employment opportunity, “Spring term of my senior year I worked as assistant in crop production and had charge of field work in experimental field plats. This work was most valuable to me. It was very strenuous work. Professor Shoosmith resigned June 30, (1906) and I was in charge of Crop Production field work until June 6, 1907.”⁴⁹

Snodgrass later recalled that his work that year was part of a pivotal “beginning of the cross-breeding and hybrid work with corn and other grain crops” which the Kansas Corn

Breeders Association sponsored in 1906. It sent traveling exhibits all over Kansas on the Rock Island and Union Pacific Railroad encouraging farmers to embrace the hybrids and discard the old “low yielding varieties”. Snodgrass wrote that “this was the period of great awakening of farm people to the new methods of the scientific agriculture,” and “the beginning of 4-H Club work for boys and girls,” and “the county agent movement throughout the States. The youngsters were coming up with their prize winning exhibits at the county and state fairs. Farm life was beginning to take on a “NEW LOOK.”⁵⁰

Snodgrass’s linkage of fairs to the introduction of scientific methodology to American agriculture reflected a historic trend that had been underway for almost half a century before 1906. Agriculture and the promotion of agricultural science were the inspirational forces behind the formation of most early American state and county fairs. The genesis of the North Carolina State Fair was a fairly typical story of the origins of such an American event. Concerned about primitive farming practices, a Dr. John F. Tompkins, editor of the *Farmer’s Journal*, created the North Carolina Agricultural Society in 1852 for the express purpose of sponsoring the first North Carolina State Fair in 1853.⁵¹ Like most early American fairs, North Carolina initially attempted to present itself as a venue for the promotion of both agriculture and industry. While the promotion of “industry” was a popular notion, the implementation of anything tangible in that regard proved illusory:

In 1920 the Agricultural Society formally abandoned the notion that its awards could influence industrial development. Noting the ‘impracticality of establishing a system of judging automobiles, machinery, mechanical and manufactured exhibits on their merits,’ the fair’s management officially adopted a policy of providing display space for retailers of industrial products for a ‘nominal rent.’ . . . When the state Department of Agriculture assumed control of the state fair in 1928, it quickly made clear that its primary goal for

the fair was agricultural promotion and that it had no interest in promoting the development of specific industries.⁵²

It was in that historical context that M.D. understood the value of “fairs” as tools for the promotion of agriculture and science. His experience with fairs also explains, in part, why thirty years later, he would found what eventually became the Alaska State Fair as the “Alaska Agricultural and Industrial Fair, Inc.” In Palmer, in 1936, the term “industrial” really had no apparent relevance to the fair. However, it would have seemed a natural connection to a man who had grown up in the Mid-west where fairs were routinely linked with technology and science.

As noted above, Snodgrass married Margaret Minis on June 8, 1907, the same day he received an appointment as “Agent in the United States Department of Agriculture Investigating Livestock and Dairying possibilities at Kodiak, Alaska.”⁵³ The newlyweds immediately departed for Alaska and arrived in Kodiak on July 27, 1907.⁵⁴

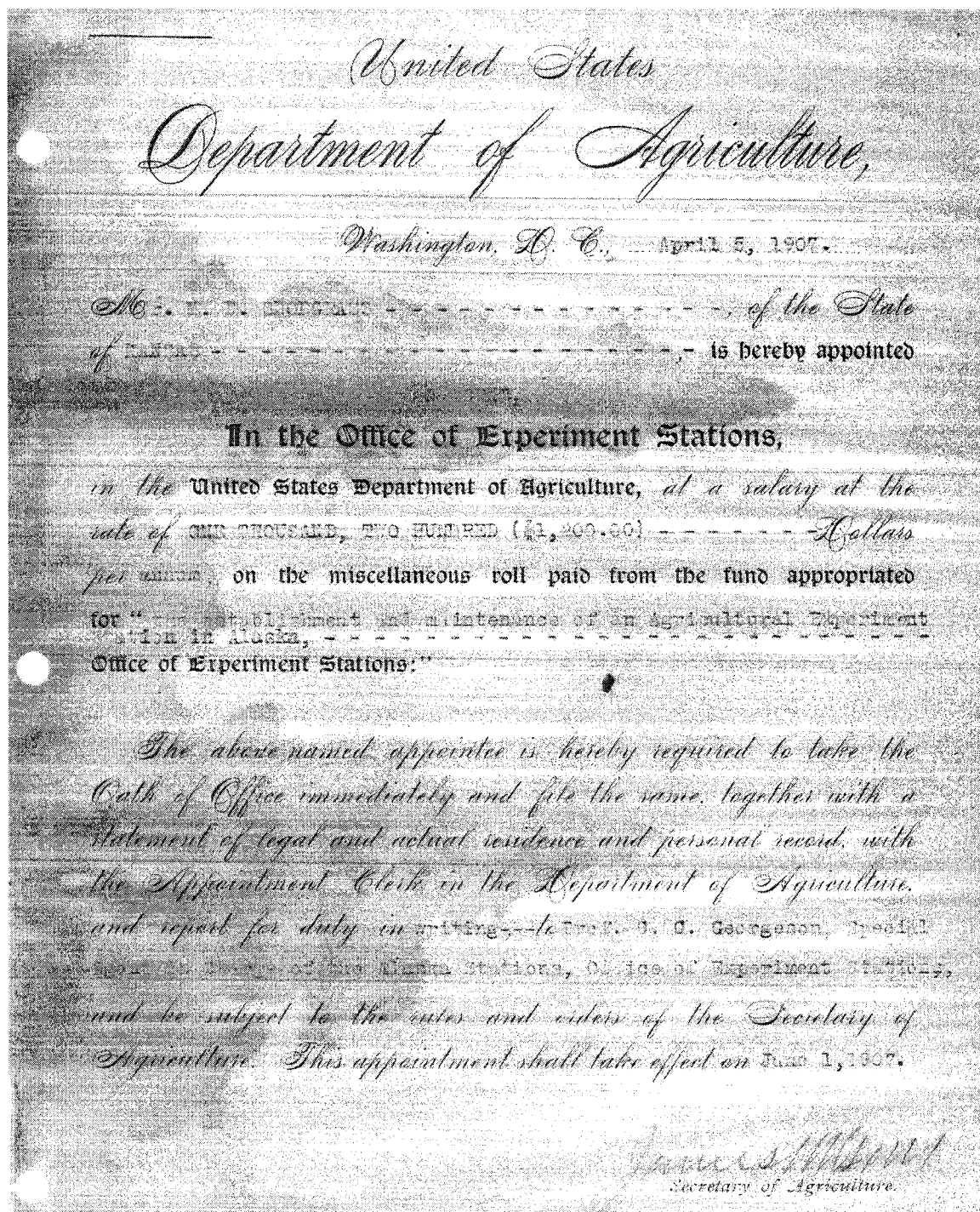


Figure 3: M.D. Snodgrass Federal Appointment Certificate to Alaska Experiment Stations, 1907. Snodgrass Papers, Archives, Alaska and Polar Regions Collections, Rasmuson Library, University of Alaska Fairbanks.

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1. Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1996), 3, 30.
 2. Ibid., 266.
 3. Bernard DeVoto, *The Western Paradox: A Conservation Reader*, eds. Douglas Brinkley & Patricia Nelson Limerick (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), xxv.
 4. Turner, *The Frontier in American History*, 219.
 5. *Anchorage Daily Times*, 7 December, 1967.
 6. Ibid., 4 September, 1964.
 7. Richard W. Etulain, *Beyond the Missouri: The Story of the American West* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2006), 244.
 8. Walter Prescott Webb, *The Great Plains* (Waltham, Massachusetts: Blaisdell Publishing Co., 1959), 280.
 9. *Matanuska Valley Record*, April, 1952.
 10. James C. Malin, *History and Ecology: Studies of the Grassland* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), 244.
 11. Ibid., 245.
 12. In an undated "Valley Realtors" biography Snodgrass is reported to have arrived in Little River, Kansas in October of 1881. In contrast to his April 1952 letter to his family. "M.D. Snodgrass - Veteran Alaskan Agriculturist," *Valley Realtors - Palmer, Alaska*, Undated.
 13. Michael McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America, 1870-1920* (New York: Free Press, 2003), 16.
 14. "M.D. Snodgrass - Veteran Alaskan Agriculturist," *Valley Realtors - Palmer, Alaska*, Undated.
 15. Malin, *History and Ecology: Studies of the Grassland*, 276-281.
 16. Milton D. Snodgrass to "My Dear People", 1 April, 1952.
 17. Etulain, *Beyond the Missouri: They Story of the American West*, 243.
 18. Malin, *History and Ecology: Studies of the Grassland*, 272.
 19. Ibid., 248.
 20. Ibid., 272.
 21. McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America, 1870-1920*, 25.

22. Milton D. Snodgrass to Bert L. Schneider, Milton and Roland Snodgrass Papers, 26 February 1925, Box 1, Folder 1925. Archives, University of Alaska Fairbanks (hereinafter cited as Snodgrass Papers).
23. *Anchorage Daily Times*, 4 September, 1964.
24. Snodgrass to "My Dear People".
25. McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America, 1870-1920*, 251.
26. Snodgrass to "My Dear People".
27. Ibid.
28. Milton D. Snodgrass to Ernest Gruening, 10 March 1945, Snodgrass Papers, Box 1, Folder 1945.
29. Snodgrass, to "My Dear People".
30. McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America, 1870-1920*, xiv.
31. Etulain, *Beyond the Missouri: They Story of the American West*, 333.
32. Ibid.
33. *Matanuska Valley Record*, October, 1952.
34. Etulain, *Beyond the Missouri: They Story of the American West*, 333.
35. Theodore Roosevelt, *The Rough Riders*, ed. Marifeli Perez-Stable (Chicago: R.R. Donnelley & Sons Co., 2003), lviii.
36. Malin, *History and Ecology: Studies of the Grassland*, 255.
37. *Anchorage Daily Times*, 7 December, 1967.
38. Milton D. Snodgrass to The Honorable Board of Regents, Alaska Agricultural College and School of Mines, *Territorial Governor Papers*, Alaska State Archives, Juneau, Alaska, 1922, Undated.
39. Snodgrass, to "My Dear People".
40. *Matanuska Valley Record*, October, 1952.
41. Snodgrass, to "My Dear People".
42. Ibid.
43. Milton D. Snodgrass to The Honorable Board of Regents, Alaska Agricultural College and School of Mines, *Territorial Governor Papers*, Alaska State Archives, Juneau, Alaska, 1922, Undated.
44. Ibid.
45. "M.D. Snodgrass - Veteran Alaskan Agriculturist," *Valley Realtors - Palmer, Alaska*, Undated.

46. Snodgrass to “My Dear People”.

47. Ibid.

48. Ibid.

49. Ibid.

50. Ibid.

51. Melton A. McLaurin, *North Carolina State Fair: The First 150 Years* (Raleigh: Office of Archives and History, North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, 2003), 5-6.

52. Ibid., 202-203.

53. *Matanuska Valley Record*, October, 1952.

54. Ibid.

Chapter 3

Frontier Missionary for Agriculture

M.D. Snodgrass had two passions throughout his life, the promotion of agriculture and higher education. His long life in Alaska led him to be involved in federal experiment stations in Kenai, Kodiak, Fairbanks and the Matanuska Valley. In addition to permitting him to fulfill his love of farming, Alaska's unsettled frontier society allowed him to assume prominent roles in promoting farming; he advanced legislation to help farmers and farm communities, and he worked to develop infrastructure needed to support farming. He was also actively involved in the planning and governance of higher education in territorial Alaska. In his lifetime he could have concluded that he had been responsible for significant progress on both fronts. The successes in advancing agriculture in Alaska were hard fought but ultimately futile. His contributions to higher education and the state fair were more enduring.

Agriculture, or more precisely, the federal government's interest in agriculture, brought Snodgrass to Alaska. It all began when President Abraham Lincoln, in 1862, signed the Morrill Act which set up a process for every state and territory to obtain federal land to support an agricultural college. In 1887 Congress passed the Hatch Act, which established "experiment stations" to be connected with agricultural colleges. Accordingly, the concept of experiment stations was extended to federal territories. In 1897 the Office of Experiment Stations in the United States Department of Agriculture assigned Dr. Charles Christian (hereinafter "C.C." as he was known) Georgeson of the Kansas State Agricultural College to investigate the establishment of agricultural

experiment stations in Alaska. Georgeson eventually directed the establishment of seven Alaska stations.¹

M.D. Snodgrass had been one of Georgeson's students in Kansas.² He received an official "appointment" dated April 5, 1907 to the "Office of Experiment Stations" in Alaska, which the United States Secretary of Agriculture signed.³ Snodgrass was assigned to work for his former professor and his Alaska assignment began on June 8, 1907, the same day he married Margaret Minis. It may very well have been Margaret, herself a librarian and college graduate (also of Kansas State before M.D.), who had selected Alaska as their new home. M.D. apparently had a set of alternative agricultural opportunities in places other than Alaska, but for reasons that may never be known Margaret persuaded him to select the latter.⁴

C.C. Georgeson, Superintendent in charge of the U.S. Department of Agriculture Experiment Stations in Alaska from their inception in 1898 through 1928, had first met Snodgrass when he was a professor of agriculture for seven years at Kansas State Agricultural College in Manhattan, Kansas.⁵ Georgeson's own commentary in the 1907 annual federal report showed both a familiarity with and confidence in Snodgrass. In fact, Georgeson even noted that Snodgrass had been his assistant at the Kansas State experiment station.⁶ In time critics charged C.C. had hired exclusively graduates of Kansas State. Early University of Alaska professor and agriculture specialist George Gasser later explained C.C.'s Kansas State preference as justified because "Kansas State men . . . knew 'how to work hard long hours from dawn to dusk.'"⁷

3.1 Into the Frontier Wilderness

M.D. Snodgrass eventually recognized that arriving in Alaska was the transformative moment in his ordinary life. By 1952 he seemingly associated his 1907 arrival in Alaska with divine intervention: “Entering Resurrection Bay about noontime on the last Sunday in June 1907, we passed the Sealion Rocks and in the still and placid waters of the rock bound entrance, we thought we heard Gabriel blowing his horn. Later we learned it was only the echo of *Santa Clara*’s steam whistle.”⁸

The journey introduced the newlyweds to America’s northern frontier. They had come via steamship by way of the “outside passage,” as opposed to the comparatively calm and scenic “inside passage.” The couple suffered from seasickness, but yet it managed to make the most of the adventure. Their ship, the *Santa Clara*, was loaded with “miners, prospectors and workmen coming to build the Katalla Railway” and Snodgrass recalled the conversations and stories of Alaska filled with “an expectant air of excitement.” Their first Alaska stop was offshore from Katalla during a storm that prevented all but one passenger from disembarking. The ship then proceeded to Valdez and most of the Katalla passengers disembarked. The Snodgrasses also took their first steps in Alaska at Valdez with a two hour long walk up to a glacier. They then continued their journey to Seward, where they unexpectedly encountered former friends from Manhattan, Kansas, George and Sylvia Saxton, who ran the *HOTEL SAXTON*. The latter had been the Kansas State Experiment Station farm foreman between 1895 and 1899 when Snodgrass had been a student.⁹

At 10:00 p.m. that same day, (June 30, 1907) the Snodgrasses again boarded the

ship and headed for Seldovia. There they stayed in the Hotel Kafoury where they had their first taste of moose as they waited “five or six days” for transportation up Cook Inlet. M.D. noted that while there they fished successfully and ate much of their catch. In the process his wife apparently developed a disdain for fish. Even almost fifty years later, Snodgrass observed, his wife disliked “fishing trips, will not clean a mess of fish, and does not like the odor of the cooking fish.” On July 4, 1907 they caught the *S.S. Tyonic* of the Cook Inlet Transportation Co. for a trip to Kenai by way of a stop at Knik¹⁰.

Kenai was their first official stop for work in Alaska. The ship deposited them on a deserted beach with their luggage at midnight on July 5, 1907. Their first moments in their new home read like a movie:

It was wild country. We carried a suitcase which became very heavy before we reached Kenai. Visibility was about a quarter of a mile along the shore and there was no sign of human habitation, only the barking of dogs in the far distance. Walking the sandy beach at low tide was a new experience to us. Early daylight came at about 2 a.m. The shore fog began to lift, and on the sand spit about one mile southeast the town of Kenai came into view. A half grown Indian boy ran from boulder to boulder stopping to peek at us and then ran down the beach toward the village to announce our coming.

We arrived in the village about 5:00 a.m., after a steep climb of 50 feet and found what seemed like a deserted habitation except dogs. We walked out to the Greek Catholic Church, and from there we recognized the U.S. Government Experiment Station buildings, much like an early frontier homestead farm. It was our introduction to Alaska agriculture.¹¹

This had to be the moment when the young couple suddenly realized they were on their own and perhaps they were not sure they had made the right decision. After traveling by ship for days, which only underscored how far they were from anything

familiar in their lives, they watched as their only apparent means of escape sailed off.

They were not at a dock. There was no phone or telegraph. It was not even clear at first that they had been deposited in the right place because for a moment there was no sign of life or structure. The frontier experience had begun.

The Kenai station consisted of two small parcels of land, one of which was near both the Kenai River estuary and the Russian Orthodox Church which still stands today. The land by the church was a 5,808 by 2,400 foot rectangular tract.¹²

Snodgrass's first official task was to evaluate the Kenai station and then decide whether to continue it or combine it with the new Kodiak livestock station at Kalsin Bay.¹³ The Kenai station had been established in January, 1899.¹⁴

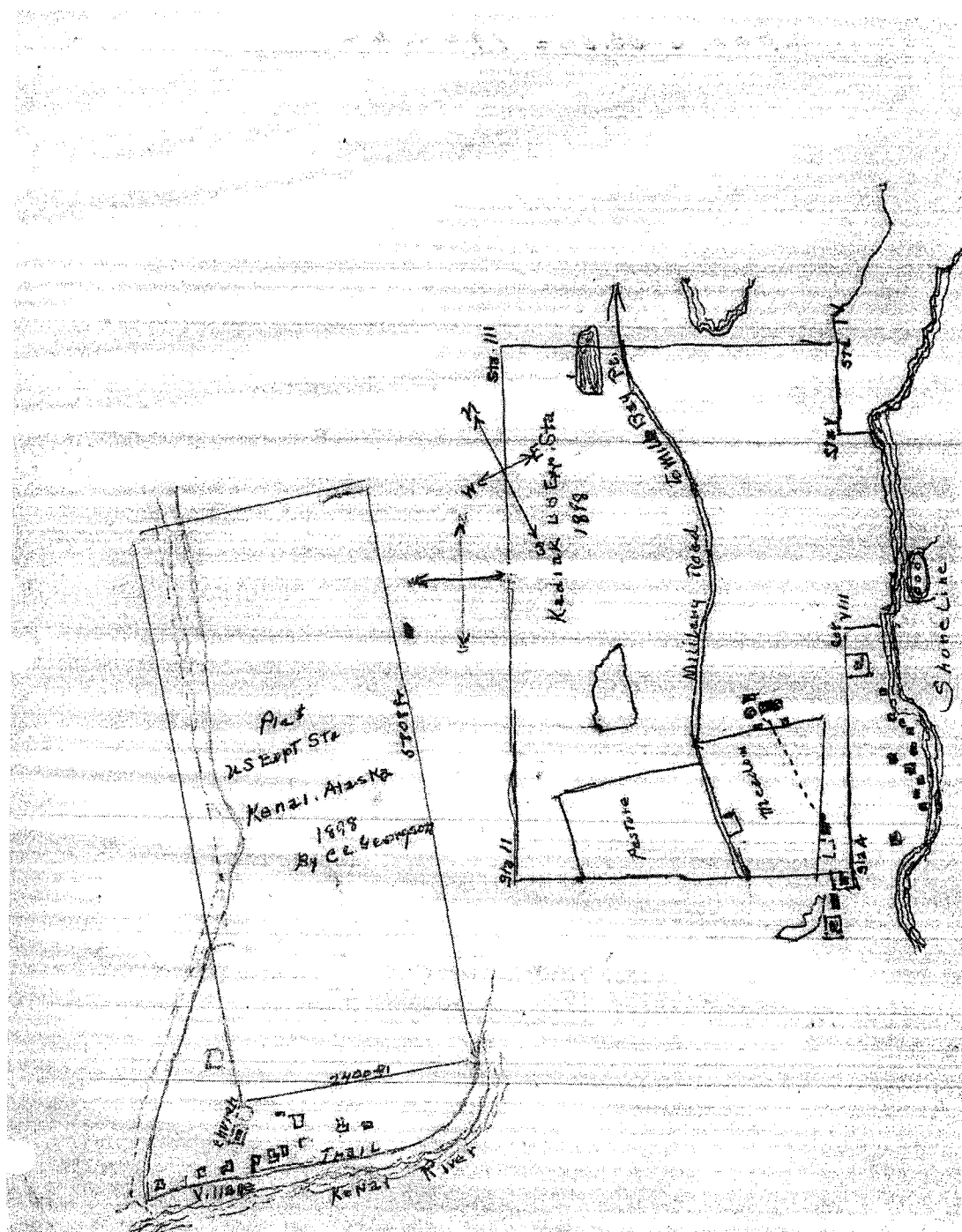


Figure 4: M.D. Snodgrass hand drawn maps of Kenai and Kodiak Experiment Stations, 1907. Snodgrass Papers, Archives, Alaska and Polar Regions Collections, Rasmuson Library, University of Alaska Fairbanks.

3.2 Kodiak and Kalsin Bay

From Kenai they continued to what would become their first Alaskan home on Kodiak Island in July, 1907.¹⁵ News of their arrival had preceded them, and a group of women were waiting on the dock in Kodiak to meet the new “bride and groom” before they even set foot on the island.¹⁶ This had to be somewhat of an adjustment as well, when they found the townspeople, starved for news, had familiarized themselves with the Snodgrasses before they had met them.

Snodgrass loved his work and farming. He had an almost infectious enthusiasm for his vision of Alaska’s agricultural potential. His nearest supervisor was several hundred miles away in Sitka. He immediately recommended relocating the Kodiak station and expanding the acreage at the new proposed Calsinsky (now Kalsin) Bay location. The federal experiment station at Kalsin Bay was a considerable distance by land or water from the town of Kodiak and the original station. Today it takes well over an hour to drive to Kalsin Bay from the city of Kodiak. The Snodgrasses were in fact in an isolated location. Today the wilderness once again reclaims the location where only a few concrete foundations with some metal stanchions remain. At Kalsin Bay, Snodgrass went to work literally carving a farm out of the wilderness. What Margaret thought of setting up a home and starting a family miles away from the nearest town on remote Kodiak infested with giant bears can only be imagined. She had been a librarian and would become a teacher, but at Kalsin Bay her only company was her husband and a small crew of male workers who built her a modest house. Both Margaret and M.D. were social people, and they had to face winters in Kalsin Bay that were cold, dark, wet, and

lonely.

C.C. Georgeson asked M.D. to produce a hardy breed of cattle and sheep stock which could be sold to local Kodiak ranchers at reasonable prices. M.D. chose to focus on Galloway cattle. The initial Galloway herd of nineteen had preceded Snodgrass to Kodiak in April, 1907. Although there is some suggestion that the herd originally came from Missouri, it appears that it had come from Illinois and Nebraska.¹⁷ The herd had expanded to 29 when ten calves were born that spring.¹⁸ Snodgrass described his project as an experiment to create a dual purpose cow that would survive in Alaska and provide both meat and milk.¹⁹

After two inspection trips, Georgeson gave Snodgrass the authority to make important decisions, including the closure of the Kenai station and transfer of the eleven Kenai cattle to Kodiak. Georgeson had quickly realized that it was imperative to give Snodgrass much authority because Alaska's long distances made it impracticable for him to travel from Sitka to the experimental farm site. After less than two months on the job, Snodgrass was in charge of two federal experiment stations at Kenai and Kalsin Bay.²⁰ Remoteness and geographical isolation developed the self-reliance and innovation so closely associated with frontier opportunity and necessity.

Snodgrass was deeply committed to his work and expressed this even to strangers. Several times, over the years, people with other interests met him and recorded his passion. A biography of early Alaskan teacher Hannah Breece clearly refers to Snodgrass, though he is never mentioned by name. The Federal Special Agent in Charge of Education in Alaska, Sheldon Jackson, assigned Breece to teach in various Alaskan

schools in the early territorial years, and in passing through Kodiak she recorded the following: “The experimental station at Kodiak was operated by a man from the Kansas state agricultural school. One of his principal projects was to introduce galloway cows and acclimatize them. These black, stockily built, shaggy-haired cattle could, at a distance, easily be mistaken for buffalo.”²¹

Snodgrass’s encounter with Breece illustrated his ability to get to know people quickly and then direct the conversation to his favorite topic - agriculture. Like a successful missionary, he was able to grab the attention of strangers and then effectively convey his passions to them. Passing writer/strangers like Breece and later writer Mary Davis in Fairbanks, along with many others, could not forget even a brief encounter with the man who wanted Alaska to be the breadbasket of the future.

Georgeson visited Kodiak in 1908 to inspect the proposed Kalsin Bay site, which today is reached by a paved but narrow and curving highway. Georgeson approved of the location and anticipated a facility that would eventually include twelve square miles of land. He authorized construction for a blacksmith shop, a 20'x200' cattle shed, a 2 room cottage, a hay barn and a 90 ton stave silo.²² M.D. was in charge, and all of the buildings, except the dairy to be built at the Kodiak property, were completed in the first year.



Figure 5: Cutting Oats, Original Kodiak Farm, 1915. 68-4-1642. Agricultural Experiment Station Photograph Collection. Archives, Alaska and Polar Regions Collections, Rasmuson Library, University of Alaska Fairbanks.

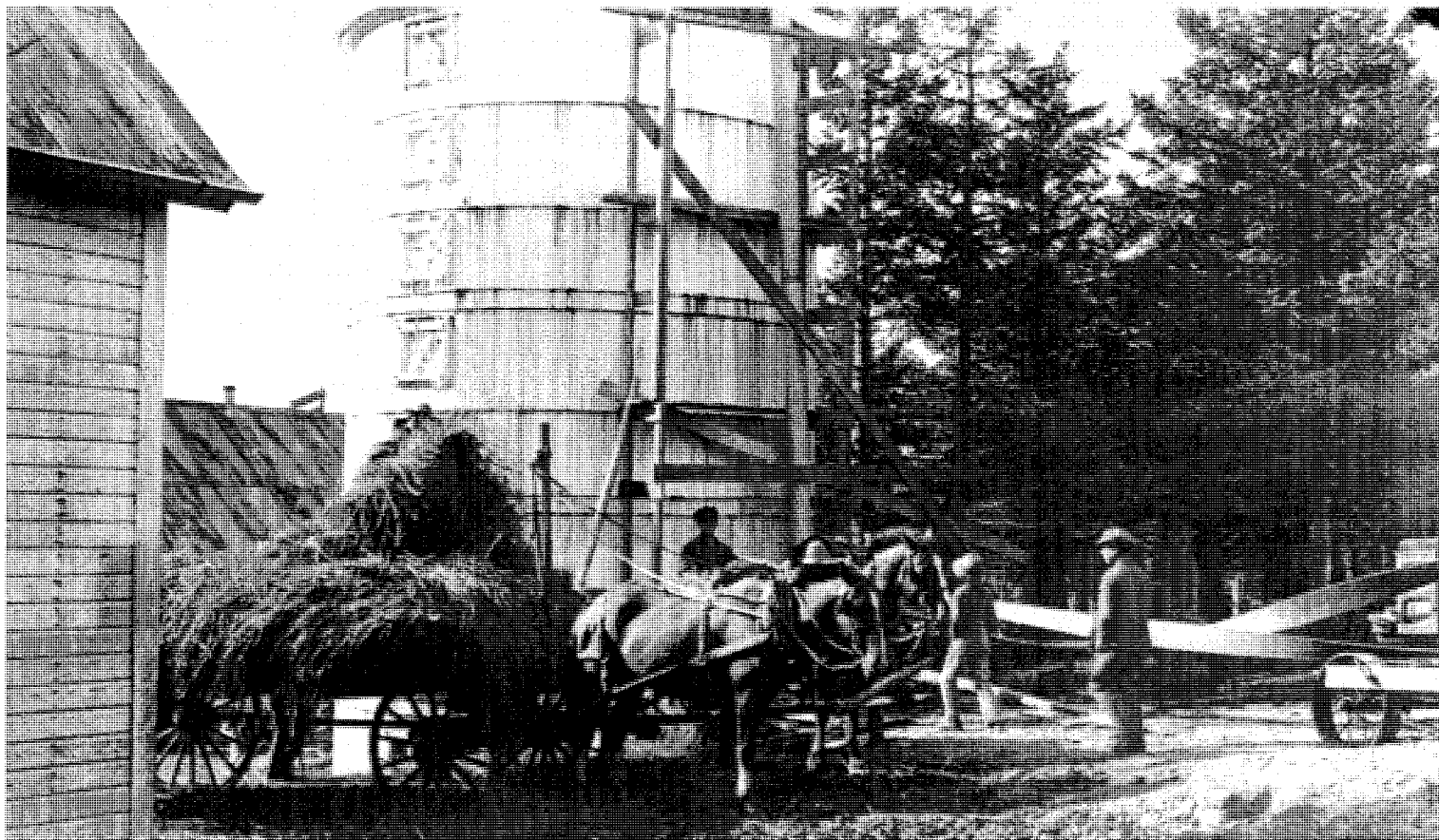


Figure 6: Oats Going into the Kodiak Silo, 1915, Original Farm, 68-4-2618. Agricultural Experiment Station Photograph Collection. Archives, Alaska and Polar Regions Collections, Rasmuson Library, University of Alaska Fairbanks.

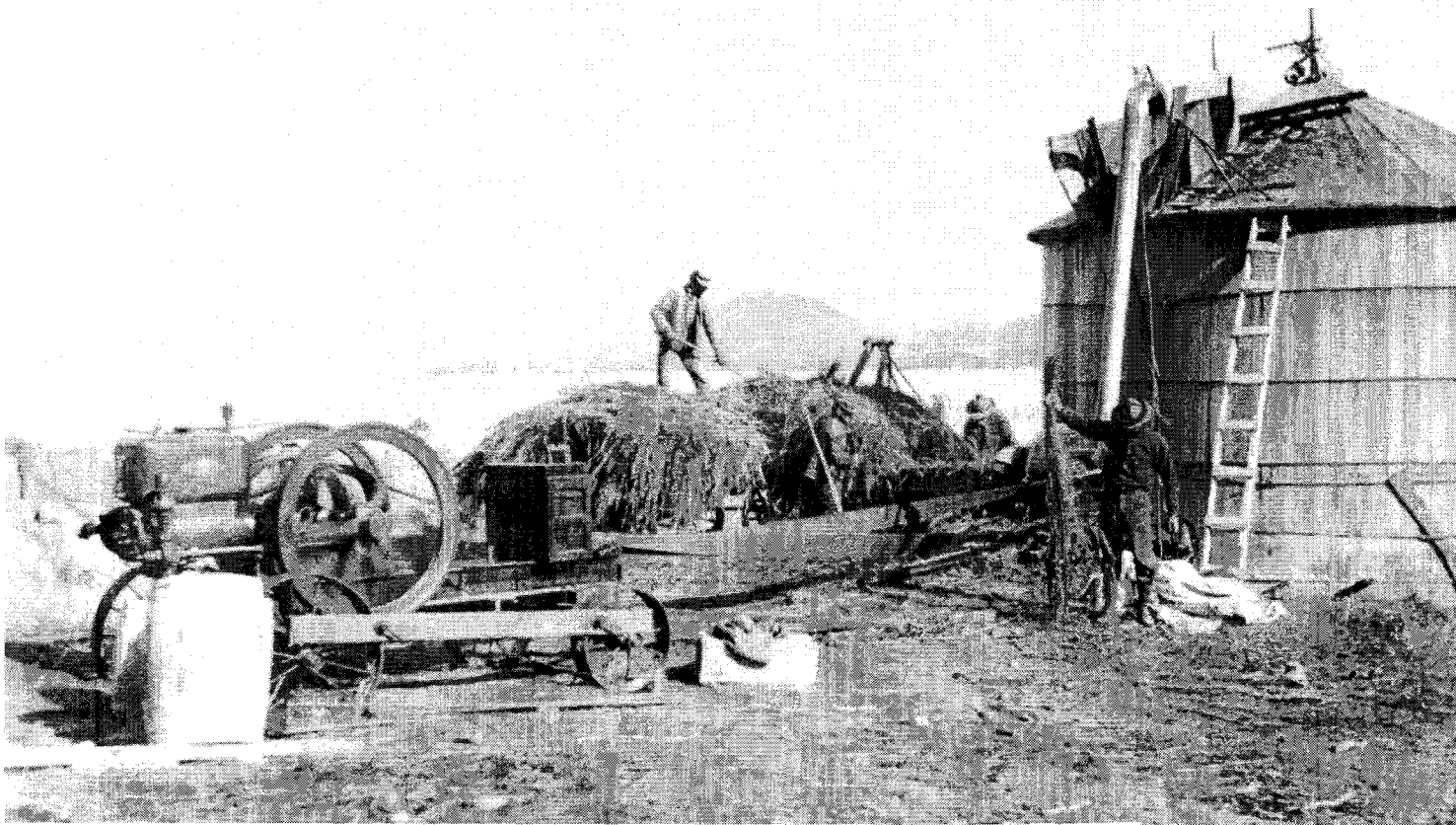


Figure 7: Filling Silo at Kaslin Bay 68-4-2614. Agricultural Experiment Station Photograph Collection. Archives, Alaska and Polar Regions Collections, Rasmuson Library, University of Alaska Fairbanks.

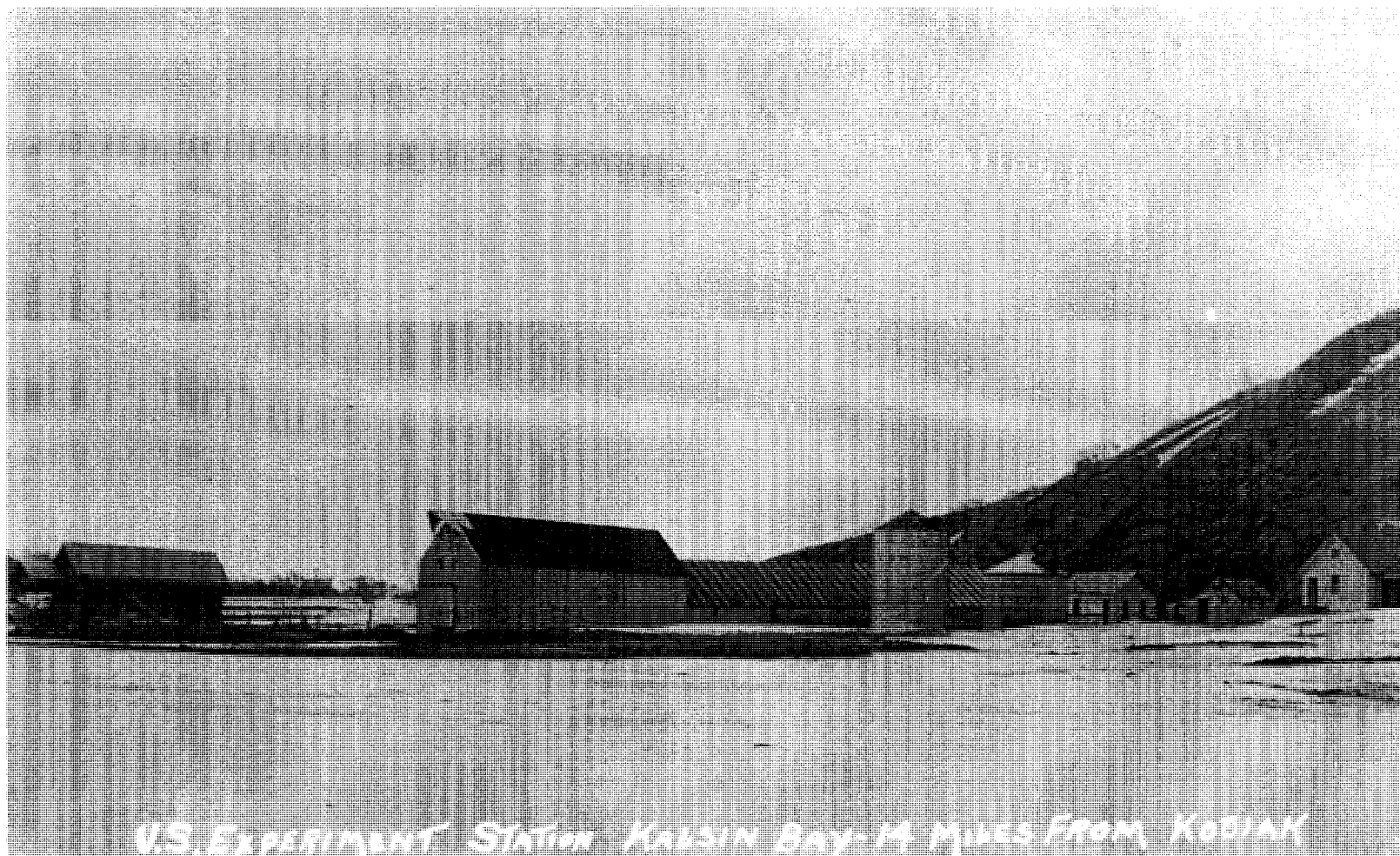


Figure 8: Kaslin Bay. 68-4-725. Agricultural Experiment Station Photograph Collection. Archives, Alaska and Polar Regions Collections, Rasmuson Library, University of Alaska Fairbanks.



Figure 9: Loading Hay, Kaslin Bay. 68-4-2615. Agricultural Experiment Station Photograph Collection. Archives, Alaska and Polar Regions Collections, Rasmuson Library, University of Alaska Fairbanks.



Figure 10: Loading Hay, Kaslin Bay. 68-4-2616. Agricultural Experiment Station Photograph Collection. Archives, Alaska and Polar Regions Collections, Rasmuson Library, University of Alaska Fairbanks.



Figure 11: Station Flock at Pasture, August 26, 1916. 68-4-2713. Agricultural Experiment Station Photograph Collection. Archives, Alaska and Polar Regions Collections, Rasmuson Library, University of Alaska Fairbanks.

3.3 Isolation and Frontier Opportunity for Finding Solutions

Snodgrass relocated the animals from Kenai to Kodiak, and the Kenai station officially closed in May of 1908. In July of 1908 Snodgrass threw himself into the hard physical labor of creating a modern farm facility in the wilderness. He built roads, cleared forty acres of timber and alders, fenced fields and prepared hayfields. He reported slow but steady progress, due in no small part to the absence of proper tools. He mixed cement by hand, dug a well and arranged for the transportation of 35,000 board feet of lumber from Afognak Island's government lumber mill at Letnik Bay, 42 miles away.²³ When the first buildings were complete, he drove most of the horses and galloway cows from Kodiak overland on a two to three day cattle drive to the new Kalsin Bay farm. The main herd arrived at Kalsin Bay on October 15, 1908.²⁴ For a man accustomed to the flat, relatively tame, plains of Kansas, the several drives from Kodiak to Kalsin Bay must have seemed harrowing. He recalled it forty-four years later:

Through fog on the mountain passes by day, and rain during the night under a wide spreading spruce tree where the four tired horses stood with drooping heads through the night, and my native guide and I slept cold and wet in our own coats and rubber boots. To our great surprise, we found early in the morning that we had a visitor within fifty feet of our sheltering tree - a big Kodiak bear. It stopped twice and circled our camp, and then continued up the mountain slope. His fresh trail through the tall grass showed it to be a big one. The scent of man surely saved our horses from a stampede or injury by the bear.²⁵

On the last cattle drive the herd bull (named "Alexander the First") escaped and disappeared until Christmas when Snodgrass found him twenty-five miles from where he had been lost. The "lost" bull had wandered around the mountains and even attacked Frank Karabelnikoff, foreman of the Frye-Bruhn Ranch. Alexander the bull had become,

in the words of Snodgrass, “wild” and also had charged him. M.D. shot the bull with No. 6 birdshot which caused him to turn away. Alexander was eventually corralled and returned to the station herd where he sired many other animals whose progeny were still found on Kodiak in the 1950s.²⁶

The station maintained the dairy barn, silo and dairy at Kodiak, while Kalsin Bay became the hay farm, home for the galloway herd and later the location for the Shropshire sheep herd. Within a year, Snodgrass noted that two Kodiak ranches (Frye-Bruhn and Abbott) had followed the station’s lead and established a retail mutton trade through outlets in Kodiak, Seward and Valdez.²⁷

There were many hardships and unforeseen problems associated with the operation of a remote experiment station. Snodgrass reported loss of cattle due to cows “falling off cliffs in the early spring, and overeating wet, dead grass before there is enough green to aid digestion, resulting in impaction of the rumen.”²⁸ Never one to be discouraged, he tried counter measures. The pastures were increasingly fenced and in early spring the cows were confined to small areas.

In 1909 Snodgrass obtained a 12 horsepower gasoline engine boat for the farm in order to gain regular access to and from Kodiak for supplies. He repeatedly complained to Georgeson about the inadequate resources provided to operate the Kodiak station, which was separated from the nearest town by many miles of ocean or an arduous overland trail. Eventually Snodgrass voiced similar complaints about inadequate resources for the Fairbanks and Matanuska experiment stations as well.

In 1910, Georgeson came from his Sitka headquarters for a three week inspection

of the new Kalsin Bay station. His 1910 annual report outlined plans for expanding operations to include sheep. It also mentioned the agricultural potential of the Matanuska Valley, a topic that would increasingly involve Snodgrass.²⁹ On April 1, 1912, President William Howard Taft, in response to recommendations by Georgeson and Snodgrass, authorized adding 3,000 acres of land to the Kalsin Bay farm and 200 acres on Near Island.³⁰

3.4 Katmai Volcano Eruption

The steady expansion of the Kalsin Bay station came to an abrupt halt on June 6, 1912. From June 6 through June 8, Novarupta Volcano in what is now the Katmai National Park erupted just a hundred miles to the west of the farm. Within forty-eight hours, eighteen inches of ash blanketed Kalsin Bay. Five years of work seemed undone in a flash. Snodgrass's annual report for 1912 was vivid yet dispassionate. He described in detail the grim reality of trying to keep foraging animals alive in a sea of ash. Many animals simply died. Plant life was gone. Streams were buried. Landslides and quicksand placed all men and animals in danger. The equipment that was needed to reassemble the experiment station and salvage the animals was out of sight, lost under three feet of ash. Life on the remnants of the station was abysmal. The cottage, which had been the Snodgrass home had ash inside within two feet of the ceiling.³¹



Figure 12: Volcano Ash Kodiak, Katmai Eruption, 1912.. 68-4-.573. Agricultural Experiment Station Photograph Collection. Archives, Alaska and Polar Regions Collections, Rasmuson Library, University of Alaska Fairbanks.

Natural catastrophes are not necessarily part of frontier settings. However, the coincidence of living in a wilderness during the Katmai eruption magnified what Dr. Judith Kleinfeld described as the stimulating effect on imagination and creativity caused by the exotic and strange in a frontier.³² The ash created a chain reaction of dire consequences for the struggling station. Snodgrass was the man on the spot during the crisis of the moment. The absence of competitors for decision making left him with the obligation of making serious decisions which ultimately expanded his self-confidence.

Unstable ash accumulation sought the lowest elevations with assistance from gravity and precipitation. Massive ash slides into valleys clogged them. Salmon runs were disrupted. Bears, deprived of their normal salmon supplies, became hungry and aggressive. Before the eruption, the bears had not been mentioned as a major issue for the Kalsin Bay station. Suddenly, mutton and beef became a substitute food source. Snodgrass reported that bears had eaten 41 of 60 station sheep. Only one crossbred ram survived the carnage. In 1912, the Kodiak brown bears were protected by federal law. Georgeson and Snodgrass agreed that the protected status of the bears was a mistake. By 1915 the situation was so desperate with regard to the sheep that Snodgrass advocated not only removal of bear protection but also the eradication of the bears. He wrote that

With favorable legislation regarding the brown bear on this island there is no doubt that the sheep industry will develop to considerable importance within a few years. With constant danger of bear attacking the sheep, the settler is obliged to herd or fence for protection from the bear. **It is hoped that Congress will recognize the rights and needs of the people** of this country to such extent that **the protection of the brown bear will be removed** and that restrictions with regard to the shipment of bearskins will be so modified that there **will be an incentive to kill off the bear on Kodiak Island**. Much expense has been incurred at this station during the

past year to protect the live stock from bear.³³

C.C. Georgeson had made a similar plea the year before wherein he had recommended the eradication of all Kodiak bears and that a special “bear reservation” should be established somewhere on the Alaska Peninsula.³⁴ It was not an uncommon opinion in that era. The great explorer-geologist, Dr. Alfred H. Brooks held a similar view on bears as an obstacle to the development of Alaska’s agricultural potential. He also advocated removal of federal laws protecting bears so as to allow for their “extermination.”³⁵ As late as 1952, Snodgrass proposed that federal laws protecting brown bears be lifted because the creatures posed a major deterrent to successful ranching on Kodiak.³⁶

The 1912 eruption, combined with the subsequent bear attacks, led to the temporary relocation of the surviving galloway herd. It was a disaster for the cows, but an opportunity for the ever resourceful Snodgrass who proceeded to start a series of new experiments around the topic of “growing grains in new volcanic ashes.”³⁷ In 1913, he along with his station assistant, Laurence Kelly, took 118 galloway cows to Toppenish, Washington (near the Columbia River gorge) in order to salvage what they could of the herd. He sold sixty-seven of the cattle and returned to Kalsin Bay with fifty-one cattle in July of 1914. The station however, never totally recovered from the volcanic eruption and eventually closed in 1931.³⁸

During the extended stay with the herd in Washington State Snodgrass seriously considered and explored opportunities to return to Kansas or Idaho. He even asked his brother to acquire land for him in Idaho in January 1913.³⁹ He believed it was quite

possible that Congress would lose interest in rebuilding the devastated Kodiak Station.⁴⁰

In February 1913 Snodgrass apparently missed out on a job to be a “Demonstration Agent for southeastern Kansas” because of the slow mail service between Kansas and Washington.⁴¹

On March 24, 1915 Snodgrass’s alma mater, Kansas State Agricultural College, asked him if he would consider returning to Kansas to work as a county agricultural agent for a salary of between \$1,500.00 and \$2,000.00 per year.⁴² The money, however, was no longer competitive with the \$2,400.00 per year that he earned in Washington State for work under the Alaska station. He informed the Kansas State Agricultural College that the Alaska station in Kodiak was certainly to continue to operate and that the future of farming in Alaska was promising. He hedged his bets, however, and indicated that he would still consider returning to Kansas if the salary could be made more competitive.⁴³ That did not happen, so Snodgrass returned to Kodiak from Washington State in May of 1915. The brief return to the contiguous states had provided Snodgrass with a opportunity for self-analysis on what life on the frontier had done for him. He had come to recognize that he not only earned more in the North but that he had more interesting options in Alaska.

3.5 The Matanuska Valley for the First Time

By the spring of 1915, C.C. Georgeson instructed Snodgrass to investigate the potential for an agricultural experiment station in the area near what was then the town of Matanuska. M.D. left Kodiak for his first trip to the Matanuska Valley in May, 1915. He traveled by boat to Seward and by train on the new Alaska Railroad to the construction

camp near Matanuska. His first trip to what would one day become his home lasted until June 27, 1915 when he returned to Kodiak.

Snodgrass traveled throughout the Matanuska Valley and met newly arrived homesteaders who had come the preceding winter and already occupied much of the land. The Alaska Railroad had encouraged these settlers and they had come anticipating agricultural and commercial opportunity in the largely unpopulated area. C.C. Georgeson subsequently wrote that “all the best land had already been located, except the land in the reservation” (the land selected by Snodgrass).⁴⁴ Various explanations have been given over the years for why Snodgrass selected several hundred acres of ridges and valleys for an experiment station. Georgeson’s official explanation is perhaps the best, namely, that everything else was already taken. Some people believed Snodgrass selected the irregular terrain instead of the flat alluvial basin of the riverbed (which was better suited for large scale farming) because he already was anticipating a location for a future college as well as an experiment station. Another explanation was that the south facing slopes of the ridges were best suited for maximum sun exposure and warmth in the summer growing season.



Figure 13: Main Street, Matanuska, 1917. 68-4.585. Agricultural Experiment Station Photograph Collection. Archives, Alaska and Polar Regions Collections, Rasmuson Library, University of Alaska Fairbanks.

Georgeson indicated that in spite of the apparent surge in local settlers, Snodgrass made a thorough search for other possible locations for an experimental station. He “examined the soil in many places, interviewed settlers, and took notes on the crops and weather conditions.”⁴⁵

Snodgrass selected 240 acres of land on the rolling bench land overlooking the Knik and Matanuska “hayflats” near what is, in 2007, the intersection of the Parks and Glenn Highways. An Executive Order created the Matanuska experiment station on September 20, 1915.⁴⁶ Two years later, 640 acres were added to the site to create the experiment station which still stands next to the hospital/commercial complex that has emerged in recent years. Snodgrass based his work out of the railroad construction camps in the valley.

The Matanuska Valley had experienced some settlement even before the railroad. Some settlers had come to the valley in the immediate aftermath of the 1898 Yukon goldrush which was followed by other stampedes to places like Nelchina and the Peters and Dutch Hills in the Susitna Valley. The small population of farmers were eager to take advantage of the benefits of a local experiment station. The federal experiment station system developed a rather well known “seed” distribution system wherein the federal government provided free seeds to Alaskans on request in return for written reports on how well they fared. The program allowed the experiment stations to gather territory-wide information about farming opportunities and where farmers actually lived. For example, the 1916 annual report included a “seed” report from a C.W. Wagner of Eska Creek (near what is now Sutton in the Matanuska Valley) who reported: “I am

sending you herewith some pictures of my ranch on Eska Creek, Matanuska Valley, showing my garden, cabin and pigs. Although we had a very poor season, I raised one ton of potatoes and enough vegetables for myself and family.”⁴⁷

Snodgrass’s work shifted from Kodiak north to the Matanuska Valley and Fairbanks in 1916. He moved his family to Seward in 1916 and settled them into a home there while he traveled and corresponded with them from the new centers of experiment station activity, as well as from Kodiak. The Snodgrasses had five children, all under the age of nine, in 1916. The children were: Roland, William, Margaret, Agnes and Mary. Seward provided a stable community setting for the Snodgrass family while M.D. shuttled between remote experiment stations.

Work continued at the Kalsin Bay site where H.E. Pratt and three laborers assisted Snodgrass in heavy duty land clearing, which involved pulling spruce and pine stumps by hand. He reported that the five men were able to pull an average of 18 stumps per day. They rebuilt the barn, dairy building and cottage along with a fifty foot corduroy log road between buildings.⁴⁸

In that same year Snodgrass oversaw the beginnings of the Matanuska station. He gathered information from local farmers and continued to test soil. He concluded that the average depth of soil in the valley was a respectable three feet. He observed, however, that “the wide variation in yield and quality of potatoes grown throughout the region clearly indicates that heavy losses have occurred from growing varieties not suited to the climate and soil.”⁴⁹

In 1916 an alarming discovery of tuberculosis was made in the Kodiak cattle herd.

Eventually the Seattle office of the United States Department of Agriculture, Bureau of Animal Industry tested the entire herd and found 21 of 54 cattle infected. That same year those cattle were moved to Kalsin Bay and were part of an experiment which showed infected cows to produce healthy calves.⁵⁰ When Snodgrass later became a territorial senator from Fairbanks one of two significant pieces of legislation for which he was responsible was a bill to provide for financial assistance to farmers whose herds might be infected with “bovine tuberculosis.”

3.6 Fairbanks

In 1917, C.C. Georgeson assigned Snodgrass to the established Fairbanks experiment station where he replaced J.W. Neal. The Fairbanks station had been created in March, 1906.⁵¹ C.C. assigned H.E. Pratt to take over Snodgrass’s duties in Kodiak while Snodgrass continued to supervise the new Matanuska farm. In April of 1917 Snodgrass visited the Matanuska farm and reported impassable roads and an inability to begin land clearing due to the weather.

The move to Fairbanks finally gave the very social Snodgrass an opportunity to interact with people. Kalsin Bay had been an isolated station where he was essentially alone with his family and a few hired hands. In Fairbanks, Snodgrass was a part of the community and he quickly participated in civic activities. The station, on the outskirts of town, was about a twenty minute journey from Fairbanks.⁵² Snodgrass moved his family into town for the winter of 1917.⁵³ While the social engagement in Fairbanks surely enriched the Snodgrasses’ lives, ultimately, the new set of social opportunities became a mental and financial distraction from his work.



Figure 14: Fairbanks Experiment Station, 1917. Mr. M.D. Snodgrass and 3 of his children. 68-4-213. Agricultural Experiment Station Photograph Collection. Archives, Alaska and Polar Regions Collections, Rasmuson Library, University of Alaska Fairbanks.

Having lived on Kodiak in relative isolation for a decade before moving to Fairbanks probably made Snodgrass a very confident newcomer to his new home. He had established his frontier credentials. He was not simply a man from Kansas. He was an Alaskan who had built a farm in the forest. He had survived bears and a volcano. In ten years he had become a confident sourdough.

In Fairbanks, Snodgrass was the face of agriculture for the residents of Interior Alaska. As he had been in the Matanuska Valley he was the local representative of the federal "seed program." Georgeson also supplied Snodgrass with various plants to be tried in central Alaska. Seed grains from Fairbanks and nursery stock from Sitka arrived and local farmers participated in the new opportunities for assistance. Snodgrass reported receiving 78 applications for seed grain and 74 applications for nursery stock. All applicants, in accordance with federal policy, agreed to collect data on record sheets to be returned to the station. The number of applicants reflected a healthy farming community in what ten years before had been largely an uninhabited area.

The seed program was a remarkably interesting attempt to carry on an informal farming experiment throughout Alaska. Snodgrass received seed and livestock requests from places as far away as Ophir (near McGrath) and Shushanna (now Chisana, near McCarthy).⁵⁴

In June 1917, Georgeson passed through Seward while Snodgrass was away. He stopped to visit with Mrs. Snodgrass and the children. Like M.D., Georgeson was excited about Alaska's farming potential and Mrs. Snodgrass wrote to M.D. after Georgeson had left: 'He (Georgeson) read me a message from Neal (the Fairbanks station manager

before Snodgrass) in which Mr. Neal said he had 33 acres of oats and 40 acres of wheat - and 27 acres of barley (100 acres of grain) planted. Doesn't that sound good? We will enjoy "real" farm life up there as we never have at Kodiak I do believe."⁵⁵

M.D. worked most of 1917 in Kodiak or one of the other stations while his family was in Seward. His correspondence with his wife revealed a less than harmonious relationship with C.C. Georgeson as well as some health concerns. Snodgrass had some type of tumor that worried his wife, but it could not have been a serious problem because Snodgrass lived to be ninety-one years of age.⁵⁶ Georgeson apparently did not accept all of Snodgrass's recommendations and his wife urged him to resign.⁵⁷

The summer of 1917 was an extremely busy one for M.D. He attempted to finish major improvements in Kalsin Bay, he shipped his personal belongings (including a crate of chickens)⁵⁸ to his family in Seward and to their new home in Fairbanks. He oversaw the establishment of the Matanuska Station, and he kept informed about events in his future Fairbanks home. The outgoing Fairbanks superintendent, J.W. Neal, had prepared a personal garden for Snodgrass and he offered to compensate Neal for the cost of the thoughtful effort.⁵⁹ In the meantime, Georgeson continued to utilize his Kansas connections and hired W.T. White of the Kansas State agricultural school to be Snodgrass's new assistant in Fairbanks.⁶⁰

Like Kodiak, the Fairbanks station, was still in an early development stage. In the summer of 1917, Snodgrass made plans for clearing forty to sixty acres for the station and hoped to receive a "10-20 Mogul Tractor" for assistance in farming the next year.⁶¹ The station already had about one hundred acres of arable land and Snodgrass needed more

machinery to plow even the existing fields. He noted that they relied on a “heavy three horse team” for most of the field work and it took about three years of tilling and additional preparation after stumps were pulled for a field to become useful.⁶²

Fairbanks was not an easy place to access in the first years Snodgrass lived there. Yet Snodgrass remained undaunted. He referred to the “stage to Nenana three times a day” and concluded that Fairbanks had “good roads” compared to Kodiak. Further, the nearby wilderness provided a substantial part of their diet as he successfully hunted caribou, moose and sheep for their meat.⁶³

On occasion his resourcefulness and high spirits were put to the test. In the summer of 1918 Snodgrass complained to Georgeson and some relatives about the lack of funding not only for proper station activities but for his own salary: “I have had my fill of this thing, and have wired Dr. Georgeson that it is impossible to carry on under the present condition, and properly support and cloth [sic] and school my family. It takes all my salary. He (Georgeson) twice asked for promotions to \$3,000 (per year) for me without avail. . . . I intimated I would apply for a commission in the National Army and move the family to the States.”⁶⁴ His exasperation was shortlived however, and on a more optimistic note, he wrote that the new college was under construction on the hill behind the station. Furthermore, he anticipated that discharged veterans would come north after the war and the college and Fairbanks would thrive and his opportunities were bound to improve.

3.7 Comfort and Discontent

The Fairbanks station, unlike remote Kalsin Bay or undeveloped Matanuska, was

an established farm in a thriving community. The farm itself did not need to be built from scratch, but merely to be expanded and maintained. Consequently, Snodgrass was able to devote his energies to community activities and he did so with great energy. C.C. Georgeson lavished praise on him in his 1919 annual report for his energetic interaction with the farmers of the Tanana Valley: "...he not only understands the farmers but has a thorough grasp of their problems. By frequently visiting their farms and by personal interest in and attention to their problems, Mr. Snodgrass has achieved very gratifying success in his work among the farmers of Fairbanks during the past year."⁶⁵

As had occurred in Kodiak where Hannah Breece had mentioned him in her memoirs, in Fairbanks he made another strong impression on a writer. Mary Davis, the author of *In Uncle Sam's Attic, Intimate Story of Alaska*, met M.D. in Fairbanks and mentioned his agricultural boosterism in her book.⁶⁶ She wrote of his association with the his own farm, Tanana Valley Fair, the experiment stations, the territorial legislature and railroad agricultural colonization projects.

Snodgrass became very involved in the Fairbanks community and territory at large. In time he became a member of the college board of trustees and a legislator in the territorial senate. The opportunities Fairbanks offered were apparently too many and too tempting to leave him satisfied with his experiment station duties. Furthermore, he seemed to feel that the federal government was neglecting proper funding for the stations in Alaska. Within three years of his arrival in Fairbanks he considered leaving government service and investigating other opportunities. His longstanding frustration with Georgeson had apparently become untenable. He was very unhappy with his job.

This did not mean Snodgrass had lost his interest in agriculture. On the contrary, more than ever before, he helped the fledgling and struggling agricultural community as much as he could. He arranged for local farmers to use the experiment station threshing machine in exchange for labor or payment to the station. He was aware of the potential of bureaucratic concerns over the personal use of federal property for compensation and therefore kept careful books to document what transactions had transpired and explained why it had been in the best interests of the station and the government to assist the 24 farmers near Fairbanks who grew about one-hundred acres of grain collectively.⁶⁷ He was concerned that the local banking community declined to finance agricultural investments because of what he considered to be a short sighted bias toward the mining industry.⁶⁸ Eventually, Snodgrass bypassed the banks and used a non-governmental organization which he had previously helped to found, the Tanana Valley Agricultural Association, Inc., to organize an independent mill. Snodgrass received five shares of the new corporation on January 10, 1920 and proceeded to devote increasing amounts of time to the organization which he believed would “pull together” the farmers and improve their long term prospects.⁶⁹

In early 1920 Snodgrass became increasingly critical of the insufficient federal funding of the stations. He even implied that “the good doctor” (Georgeson) was responsible for the decline of the Kodiak station. He was worried that the “good doctor” also dragged his feet allowing Snodgrass to go on a trip to procure much needed breeding stock for goats and milk cows.⁷⁰

In January of 1920 Snodgrass told George W. Gasser that he was frustrated with

the limitations of trying to “rear a family in Alaska on a salary.” He observed that the age of the “tractor” had come to Fairbanks and that the owners of some of the larger (270 and 320 acre) farms near the station had approached him to join their newly mechanized operations as “a working partner.”⁷¹ He expressed regret over past decisions to stay with Georgeson and the experiment stations instead of taking opportunities in Kansas. He worried that “in a few years we will be looking about in a strange pasture, having given all our useful years to work as someone’s hired man, and like the old broken down pavement horse, be cast off on some poor farmer for our board.”⁷² Snodgrass felt that Georgeson had misled him when he had been given a combination of raises, salary advances, “promises of co-operative work” and even Georgeson’s own job in Sitka if only he “would remain a little longer.” The Sitka position showed no signs of opening to Snodgrass soon. He regretted that he had not taken the Matanuska station superintendency which, he felt, offered a better lifestyle and opportunities for a decent education for his family. He especially resented Georgeson’s accusation that Snodgrass played “for popularity with the farmers and the politicians,” which offended him deeply. “I could hardly speak for a while. I guess I swore a little.” Snodgrass asked Gasser to keep his confidences and said that he shared them only so that Gasser would better understand “any movement of mine in the future.” Clearly, Snodgrass was contemplating a career move away from the experiment stations under C.C. Georgeson.⁷³

In March 1920 Snodgrass gambled four months of his salary and purchased one half of a *Cleveland tractor* with a local individual to farm on a contract basis and share the proceeds. In addition, he obtained an option to purchase 160 acres of land from a

farm near the experiment station. In addition, he already had his eyes on a farm adjoining the 160 acres he hoped to buy. He knew that his sideline farming might get him into trouble with Georgeson. He wrote his brother telling him that: "If I get fired for dipping into farming, so much the better." Snodgrass advised his brother that Alaska "will have better opportunities to make money than I can see in the states" and "I am decided to go for the money now," meaning he planned to leave the experiment station soon.⁷⁴

At the same time he complained about his employer to Gasser he also outlined his vision for the future of Alaska to a Methodist missionary:

The production of the mines have (sic) fallen off to such extent that it makes but little business sense. When a country is not producing it soon eats itself out of house and home. The only hope of Fairbanks today is divided about equally between mining and farming. The latter is picking up and will in time support Fairbanks as it is today. ... From an agricultural standpoint this country has a wonderful future, depending upon the mining development within reach of river and railroad transportation from Fairbanks. Grain growing has begun and a flouring mill will come this summer. The farmers will do well here when mining operations again resume.⁷⁵

In November 1920, Snodgrass told Georgeson to either take his advice or he might quit. There was not enough money to run both the Rampart and Fairbanks experiment station and therefore: "it seems there is but one course of action left open to you in this matter. That is to close this station or the Rampart station and place Mr. Gasser here and give him the funds now required by both stations and carry on the work as it should be done."⁷⁶ Despite his frustration with the experiment stations, Snodgrass had not given up on agriculture in Alaska. He wrote to Gasser: "I will probably farm nearby. I feel I can make a living, and that is all I have made in the work. I need my

family and they need me as never before. I will try and grow up with the boys and girls.”⁷⁷

Snodgrass’s communication with Georgeson had taken on a direct and critical tone that reflected his pent-up frustration combined with a confidence that he could and soon would be independent of Georgeson’s control. In a lengthy letter to Georgeson, Snodgrass detailed his frustration with the continued underfunding of the experiment stations and offered his resignation.⁷⁸

The separation occurred under peculiar circumstances. Snodgrass learned that his “resignation” had been accepted on December 28, 1920 from his friend, G.W. Gasser, who notified Snodgrass that he was his replacement.⁷⁹ Yet Snodgrass and Georgeson would continue to maintain a oddly amicable relationship. Snodgrass continued to manage the station through the spring of 1921, and his report to Georgeson in April showed little evidence of unhappiness. He outlined various activities and wrote that one of his legacies was the positive relationship between the local farmers and the station. When he had arrived the farmers had been hostile to the experiment station. His formal resignation date of April 24, 1921, ended a career that spanned fourteen years.

In the 1921 annual report of the experiment stations in Alaska, Georgeson praised Snodgrass for his fourteen years of service and especially his instrumental role in the formation of the Tanana Valley Agricultural Association and its ownership and development of a flour mill.⁸⁰ Snodgrass had raised nearly two thirds of the \$22,000.00 needed to build the mill.⁸¹

3.8 Private Farming and Failure

During his fourteen years in Alaska, Snodgrass had shone remarkable resourcefulness in taking charge of and closing a remote experiment station in Kenai, building an even more remote station from nothing in the wilderness on Kodiak Island and founding a third station in Matanuska. In clearing wilderness, fighting bears, enduring a great volcanic eruption, transporting animals to and from the contiguous states, dealing with miners and their diverse agricultural needs in the north, Snodgrass had demonstrated creativity and tenacity. It is hard to imagine Snodgrass as a risk-taker in Kansas. He had labored persistently to finish a college degree over a twelve year period. He had incrementally worked to escape the drudgery of life as a farm laborer and to get good government jobs at the post office, the college in Kansas, and the experiment stations in Alaska. He understood and valued modest but steady income and security. It appears that his experience in Kodiak had given him cause to think he was capable of more and he was willing to take risks in Fairbanks in 1920. Professor Kleinfeld has described part of this phenomenon associated with remote life in the frontier as “throwing off the shackles of the past” and “the cultural ethos of Alaska celebrat[ing] the American frontier romance of freedom, individuality, and resistance to authority.”⁸² The Fairbanks effort was to prove a disappointing romance for M.D. Nevertheless, he would not go to his grave wondering “what might have been”.

Furthermore, he seemed undaunted and soon attempted a much more creative endeavor. Though this idea was not to come to fruition, his considering it, so soon after leaving the Fairbanks experimental farm illustrates his creative energy, which appears to

have been fueled by the frontier atmosphere in Alaska. Snodgrass tried to enter the fledgling, but promising reindeer industry. He asked Dr. Edward Nelson of the United States Biological Survey in Washington, D.C. for a permit to capture 200 to 500 wild caribou bulls from the Woodland caribou herd and mate them with 1,000 reindeer does. He also requested a rangeland permit for a 20 x 40 mile tract of land near McCarty (near modern Delta) for his enterprise.⁸³

The timing of Snodgrass's inquiries came one year after Dr. Nelson had traveled to Nome in July of 1920 to meet with the "Reindeer King," Carl J. Lomen, to lay the groundwork for the creation of a federal experiment station "for the scientific study of reindeer."⁸⁴ The Lomen brothers had succeeded in creating a major commercial reindeer operation on the west coast of Alaska which eventually involved nearly a quarter of a million reindeer.⁸⁵ The 1921 national publicity associated with the energetic promotions and congressional testimony of Carl Lomen seemed to point to a bright future for reindeer farms in Alaska. Yet Snodgrass's inquiries apparently fell on deaf ears and nothing came of this scheme.

Snodgrass bought a farm in Fairbanks where he raised wheat, some potatoes and animals. He also had some success with pig farming. His private farming endeavor, however, failed after two years. He told his brother that the effort had been "a bitter dose," and that the "hardest thing I have done in a long time was to give up the idea of farming and go back onto a salary again."⁸⁶ He later told his mother that all of the 1923 "season's crop was taken to pay the (hired) man, and I held the bag in most things."⁸⁷ Given his expectations and optimism about independent farming three years earlier,

Snodgrass must have been humbled by the harsh learning experience. However, he proved to be resilient and practical. He eventually returned to government service with “the good doctor.” Georgeson apparently harbored no grudges and valued Snodgrass enough to reinstate him and give him a new responsibility.

Snodgrass’s farming hardships coincided with his first foray into territorial politics when he served a two year term in the territorial senate from the fourth judicial district. He was elected in 1922 for a two year term in the territorial senate even as his private farming venture was just beginning. While the legislative experience did not serve him well financially, and probably was a major distraction from a failing venture in private farming, it did provide an opportunity to show his priorities in the legislation with which he came to be associated, namely an agricultural and industrial fair bill and an amendment to the bovine tuberculosis laws to provide reimbursement to affected farmers.

3.9 Return to the Matanuska Valley

In 1923, Snodgrass returned to federal employment when he received an appointment to be the Agent for the United States Department of Agriculture in charge of surveying information from Alaska’s territorial homesteaders. In October he found himself once again directly involved in the operation of Alaska’s federal experiment stations when Georgeson named him Senior Agronomist in Charge of the Matanuska station.⁸⁸ The new job initially entailed supervising four men in the summer and two in the winter.⁸⁹ As he had done before, Snodgrass moved to the new job site alone, leaving his family in Fairbanks to finish their affairs there while he prepared a new home for them. Family correspondence during this transition reflected the family’s limited

financial resources. Margaret and the children handled the autumn farm harvest, disposed of produce and took direction from M.D. on how to handle bills with the money he sent to them.⁹⁰ Margaret's letters clearly showed a household under financial and social stress. M.D.'s checks barely enabled the family to pay debts and taxes owed. Their Fairbanks home had cost \$4,600; by the end of 1923 a \$2,500 payment was due and the family had trouble finding a lender for that amount.⁹¹

While his family was in Fairbanks he developed a plan to have them ship him some goats, a sow and eight pigs for the winter. The idea was to slaughter some for food and use the remainder to further develop a farming enterprise at their new home the next year.⁹² Snodgrass was determined to explore the potential of pig farming even though the experiment station itself was not involved in any such research. So Snodgrass developed his own small private pig farm near the Matanuska experimental station.⁹³

Snodgrass's relationship with C.C. Georgeson had been repaired. The latter apparently was happy to have M.D. back as an employee and praised his work at the Matanuska station.⁹⁴ The family fortunes soon took a turn for the better when the school teacher in Matanuska announced she would be leaving, thus opening a job opportunity for Margaret.⁹⁵ Nevertheless, conditions near Matanuska were hardly wonderful. M.D. planned to apply for a 16 x 24 wall tent to serve as the new temporary family home when they arrived from Fairbanks.⁹⁶

Snodgrass's vision for Alaska's agrarian future had not been diminished by his own setbacks in Fairbanks. He was, perhaps inspired by his own experiment, convinced that Alaska's long term future included a stable farm base. The frontier lure of instant

wealth possible from gold strikes was a short term obstacle to persuading new Alaskans to opt instead for the stability offered by a less lucrative but steady farming economy. He wrote to his brother in 1923 that he thought Alaskan businessmen were finally starting to recognize the long term value of small but stable farming enterprises. He believed that large scale mining enterprises had plundered Alaska's riches with little to show for them once the resource had been exported. As Alaska's gold rushes tapered off, he believed the time had come for systematic settlement of Alaska by farm families. He took it upon himself to survey Anchorage businessmen about their agricultural needs and was happy with what appeared to be a promising economic future for Matanuska Valley farmers.⁹⁷

In addition to his work to expand agriculture at home and at the station, Snodgrass had come to appreciate the importance of developing the supportive infrastructure needed for a long term, stable, farming community. His foray into politics in Fairbanks had given him an insight into the inner workings of territorial politics, and he lobbied the territorial legislature actively for Matanuska Valley road improvements and a bridge across the Matanuska canyon near what is now Palmer and the Knik River.⁹⁸

In March of 1924 he also contacted Anchorage businessmen to gain financial backing for a "vegetable cannery" in either the Valley or Anchorage. He made himself the intermediary between the Anchorage Chamber of Commerce, the Matanuska Valley Settlers Association (of which he was chairman) and the U.S. Experiment Station. He invited Anchorage businessmen to come to the Valley and meet the settlers who "can raise vegetables and fruits of the best quality."⁹⁹

While Anchorage businessmen responded but slowly, his vision was prescient in

that all of the improvements he proposed eventually came to be standard features of the local transportation network. In 1924 Snodgrass saw himself as a pioneer for civilization in the wilderness. He wrote: "Around the World Fliers due at Seward today and Ben Eielson of Fairbanks has completed five mail deliveries at Magrath (sic) without mishap and in record flying time. We are beginning to feel that we are slipping back into civilization a little here and there, and someday we will be just like the rest of the U.S. Some day when you come to look us over again, we hope to be all lit up with electricity, have paved roads, consolidated rural schools, and a thriving little village at the Junction (Matanuska)."¹⁰⁰

In that same summer he directed improvement of station facilities, the seeding of 85 acres, the clearing of additional acreage and extensive fencing. In addition, on his own farm he employed his now high school age sons, Roland and William, to cultivate an acre of potatoes, a quarter acre of strawberries, and maintain 15 pigs. Furthermore, Snodgrass had finally decided to make Alaska his permanent home: "We have made some good friends in this north land . . . to come back to the states we would feel out of date and among strangers. We know the language here and half way understand the people."¹⁰¹

He liked living in the Matanuska Valley much better than in Fairbanks. His children were in better health and his wife liked the scenery and milder climate.¹⁰² He kept his job options open, however, and in November 1924 asked C.C. Georgeson to inform him of the latter's retirement plans ahead of time so that he could apply for the Sitka job.¹⁰³

In the meantime, the Kalsin Bay station wound down and both the sheep and the superintendent (W.T. White) of the Kodiak station were transferred to the Matanuska

station. By 1926, Snodgrass once again supervised his favorite galloway cattle herd at the Matanuska station.

He had served in the territorial senate while in Fairbanks and still served on the college Board of Trustees. Increasingly he felt comfortable informing the press of his own opinions on a wide range of issues. In 1925 he wrote a newspaper article recommending application of political pressure on the transportation industry, especially the railroad, to reduce transportation costs. He believed the high transportation costs restricted the ability of Alaskan farmers to challenge their competitors in Washington State and elsewhere. He accused the railroad and steamship companies of being shortsighted by overcharging farmers for shipping while providing cheap rates for out of territory competitor food.¹⁰⁴

3.10 The Alaska Railroad

On April 1, 1929, Snodgrass changed career paths once again, although he remained a federal employee. He went to work, on loan, to the Alaska Railroad as an Agricultural Development Agent.¹⁰⁵ His new job was to recruit settlers to populate the rail corridor from Seward to Fairbanks. Part of the job involved travel to the contiguous 48 states to interview prospective settlers and screen worthy applicants and then assist them in obtaining special "settlers' rates" for their transportation north together with their equipment and household goods.¹⁰⁶ In his first year Snodgrass received over 2,500 inquiries and interviewed 37 applicants.¹⁰⁷ By the time he finished the job he had reviewed over 12,000 applications, contacted 650 prospective candidates and brought 120 families to Alaska. He was careful to give his recruits a realistic picture of the hardships

they would face and the resources they would need. Snodgrass' supervisor at the railroad, "Colonel" O. (Otto) F. Ohlson, had developed and embraced the theory that Americans of Scandinavian origin were best suited for Alaska because of the climate and geographical similarities between Alaska and their ancestral home. It was a theory of special "racial adaptation" that the federal government employed in its selection of colonists for the 1935 founding of the Palmer Colony. Snodgrass was specifically instructed not to seek settlers from California because that climate would "unfit them for Alaska."¹⁰⁸

In time, Snodgrass's work became confused with Ohlson's vision for a farming community in the Matanuska Valley dominated by settlers with a nordic heritage. By 1940, the Palmer Territorial School produced a local history which falsely credited Snodgrass with creating the "colonization plan" for Col. Ohlson in Palmer in 1927.¹⁰⁹ In fact, Snodgrass did not start to work for Ohlson until 1929.

Of the 12,000 applicants he reviewed only 120 came north, and of those 54 families located in the Matanuska Valley.¹¹⁰ Snodgrass advised them to bring, "equipment, chickens, and a cow. More important, they should have at least \$2,000 to \$2,500 to carry them through to the time when the homestead would begin to support them."¹¹¹ By 1933, the Great Depression made Snodgrass' job superfluous because only a few could afford funding their journey to Alaska. The railroad terminated his job.¹¹²

Thus in 1933, Snodgrass retired after twenty-five years with the federal government with a modest pension. Once again he returned to his passion as a private farmer. In 1934 he purchased a one-hundred sixty acre homestead that is now surrounded by the City of Palmer, which did not exist in 1934. Snodgrass owned the farm until his

death when it passed into the ownership of his son, Roland. During his lifetime Snodgrass used the farm acreage for hay, to raise beef and to operate a dairy with a special interest in pigs. Part of the property that Snodgrass acquired eventually became the core of the City of Palmer once the Matanuska Colony was started in 1934.

3.11 The New Deal Colony

On February 19, 1934 Col. Ohlson and Anchorage businessman Arthur A. Shonbeck¹¹³ went to Washington, D.C. to discuss the concept of a federal agricultural colony in the Matanuska Valley. Snodgrass drafted a memo for the men which envisioned a colony consisting of 40 acre farms. Snodgrass's memo may have been prepared several years earlier.¹¹⁴

Despite Snodgrass's and the railroad efforts, agriculture in the Matanuska Valley in 1934 was in the doldrums. The Great Depression and high shipping costs made agriculture in Alaska a losing proposition. The surge of homestead farms from the 1915-1916 railroad crews had resulted in 172 patented homesteads. However, the influx of railroad workers who filed for homesteads subsided. Snodgrass and the railroad eventually had attracted 54 more farms, but by 1934 only 117 occupied farms remained from that total of 282 that had shown promise, and most of the "occupied" farms no longer actually farmed anything by 1934.¹¹⁵ Yet, things were about to change in Alaskan agriculture. That same summer the assistant administrator for the newly created Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA), Jacob Baker, came to Anchorage and the Matanuska Valley together with Alaska Governor John Troy's secretary and several businessmen, including Arthur A. Shonbeck. The trip convinced Baker that the

Matanuska Valley could support thousands of farms and that the federal government should give development a boost by creating a government-sponsored settlement. Baker met directly with Governor Troy and Colonel Ohlson.

Ohlson then started a media campaign in the *Anchorage Daily Times* extolling the potential of Matanunaska Valley farming. He outlined a scheme for a planned colony to Baker, and with Snodgrass's help, he projected a farm market potential in Anchorage. This became the basis for the New Deal Colony of Palmer in 1935. By January 1935 Alaska's territorial delegate to Congress, Anthony J. Dimond, and Arthur Shonbeck made a presentation about an agricultural colony to the director of the Division of Territories and Island Possessions, Ernest Gruening.¹¹⁶

In 1935, Snodgrass also became involved in the formation of the Northland Pioneer Grange in the Matanuska Valley. The Grange was a familiar national farmers organization that had been founded in 1867. The Grange came to be associated with the New Deal colonists of Palmer even though it was actually formed by the pre-colony settlers, most of whom Snodgrass had recruited. Snodgrass must have had mixed feelings about the Colony. In some ways it was a project that resembled what he had labored for years to create himself. In four years of hard work for the railroad, he had found 54 farmers for the Matanuska Valley. Then suddenly, in one summer, nearly three-hundred more arrived all at once. On the other hand, the people he had recruited had paid their own transportation and on average had far more staying power than the New Deal colonists. Furthermore, Snodgrass, as a life-long Republican who had recruited farmers on the basis of their willingness to invest and risk their own money, might have had

doubts about bringing destitute people to Alaska with full government sponsorship. Snodgrass was always proud that a much higher percentage of the colonists he had recruited stayed in Alaska than had the New Deal colonists of 1935.

3.12 The Pig Chain

Nevertheless, Snodgrass became actively with the new colonists. They were farmers and they were going to fulfill his vision of an emerging agrarian Alaska. Upon their arrival he started what became known to some as a “pig chain” where he would give young children a female pig to start a litter with the understanding that one day they would return a female to him. It was meant to expand the presence of pig farming throughout the new colony. Jalmar Kerttula, himself a recipient of a “beautiful hampshire” pig (which died) and the son of a colonist, recalled in later life that M.D., “had a lifelong fascination with hogs, he was very adept at raising large litters and good pigs.”¹¹⁷

The New Deal Colony was formed around the Snodgrass farm. The original Palmer townsite consisted of 189 acres of which 139 belonged to Snodgrass. Near the end of his life he claimed credit for how the town of Palmer developed. He sold part of his land and for himself he kept the ‘first 70 acres we had cleared.’ He eventually moved to a smaller acreage near the Valley Presbyterian Hospital.”

In his retirement Snodgrass became thoroughly involved in the politics of the colonists and the Matanuska Valley in general. He repeatedly sought election to the territorial house or senate. He prevailed once in 1952 when he served one term in the House focused, as might be expected, on the promotion of agriculture. He also wrote

numerous columns for the local newspapers, first for *The Valley Settler* and then its successor, the *Matanuska Valley Record*. His columns usually related to agriculture in Alaska. By 1939 he wrote lengthy columns condemning the governing body of the colony, the ARRC (Alaska Rural Rehabilitation Corporation) which he characterized as “an over-subsidized office, bent on maintaining their status quo until the last federal dime is spent.”¹¹⁸ Snodgrass was unhappy that Ross Sheely, the second general manager of the Colony, had undone the promising beginnings of Don Irwin, the first general manager of the Colony. Irwin had attempted to create a co-operative association for both pre-colonists and colonists with a governing body evenly divided between the two. The group had been on the verge of creating a formal “co-operative” when Sheely stepped into Irwin’s post and dismissed the council.

Sheely then made the co-operative a reality but put it entirely under the control of the ARRC and himself, nearly excluding the settlers, like Snodgrass, from the governing body. Settlers could join, but unlike the colonists they could also leave the Co-op. Colonists were obligated by contract to participate in the Co-op as a condition of their original agreement with the federal government. Snodgrass wanted the ARRC to let go of the Co-op and give it true independence from what he described as secretive and incompetent management. He also wanted the Co-op to extend to colonist members the right to withdraw from the Co-op, as the settlers were allowed.¹¹⁹

3.13 The Old Man

On March 10, 1945, at the age of sixty-nine, M.D. made an unsuccessful attempt to be a key player in the future of Alaska agriculture. He applied to Territorial Governor

Ernest Gruening to be considered for the position of Commissioner of Agriculture “should Don Irwin not accept the post.”¹²⁰ He did not get the position, and it is not clear that there was any response. Snodgrass was a politically active Republican candidate for public office on an almost perennial basis and Gruening was a Democrat. It probably did not help that Snodgrass had made an unsuccessful bid for the territorial house as a Republican the year before.¹²¹ Snodgrass’s legacy was safe, however; his son, Roland eventually became Director of Agriculture under Alaska State Governor Walter J. Hickel the year after M.D. had died.

The guidebook to the Matanuska Valley’s “Seventh Annual Fair” in 1947 was dedicated to M.D. featuring a full page photo and a brief inscription:

Milton D. Snodgrass

More than forty years of his life have been devoted to the advancement of Agriculture in Alaska. His labor and unfailing devotion to the Matanuska Valley Fair have contributed largely to his success through the years. To Mr. Snodgrass, this book is affectionately dedicated.¹²²

Snodgrass was seventy-one years old and thought to be near the end of his life, yet he lived twenty more years. His friends and neighbors in the Matanuska Valley had come to appreciate his single-minded determination to advance the cause of agriculture, and they publicly recognized him for it through the medium of the fair he had founded. Former Alaska State Senator Jalmar Kerttula summarized his life succinctly as “Farming was everything to him, his life, his hobby.”¹²³

Snodgrass continued to embrace all aspects of the agricultural life. In the late 1940s he compiled agricultural statistics for Alaska and arranged for his findings to be published in the local newspaper. He itemized produce harvested and dairy farm totals.¹²⁴

3.14 The Matanuska College

In 1952, when he was elected to the territorial legislature, one newspaper biography placed in bold print one sentence that summed up Snodgrass's platform and embraced his lifelong support for agriculture and higher education: **"I will work for vocational training in our schools of Alaska, and for an Agricultural College at Palmer."**¹²⁵ He won on that platform. It was a statement consistent with his goals when he had first selected the site for the experiment station at Matanuska thirty-six years earlier. He did not succeed in founding a college in Palmer but a community college was founded in Palmer in 1958 and later relocated to a permanent campus one mile from the experiment station he had originally selected.

The last years of M.D.'s life in Palmer were both comical and in some ways poignant. Several people in Palmer remember an elderly M.D. with up to as many as 90 pigs having difficulty in adjusting to the competing needs of a town he had helped create and his pre-existing farm. Some of the citizens of Palmer had become disgruntled with M.D.'s free ranging cattle and pigs. Citizens complained to Palmer City attorney Burt Biss that M.D.'s cattle and pigs were eating their flowers.¹²⁶

Others remember M.D. herding his pigs with his old green International pickup, always whining in low gear: a long line of pigs, followed by M.D. in his pickup, followed by his dog.¹²⁷ Although the city council passed an ordinance to stop free ranging animals in Palmer, citizens by and large tolerated M.D. It seemed that their respect for the pioneer farmer outweighed their frustration with his wayward pigs. Longtime resident

Noel Kopperud reflected that “M.D. was allowed to live out a pre-colonist lifestyle out of pure respect and liking the guy ... people sensed he had lived several lives.”¹²⁸

On the evening of January 22, 1999, the barn that Snodgrass had built on his farm burned to the ground, ninety-two years after he had first arrived in Alaska.¹²⁹ Most of the farms in the Matanuska Valley had since become housing for Anchorage commuters, and increasingly, it had become apparent that his vision of agriculture in Alaska had not taken root in the Matanuska Valley. In June of 2007, the Matanuska Maid Dairy announced its imminent closing after nearly seventy one years of existence.

Although he would not have liked the analogy, the story of Snodgrass paralleled the story of agriculture in Alaska. Snodgrass had a successful career as a government employee trying to develop farming in Alaska. He was not successful as a farmer when he briefly left government employment in 1921. Only after he retired with a pension did he once again become a farmer who dabbled in real estate and politics. Likewise, while private farming in Alaska was always possible, it has historically had difficulty competing with imported farm products.

Like most politicians, Snodgrass inevitably was the subject of critical commentary. His pivotal role, described in the following chapter, in the failed attempt to replace Charles Bunnell with himself as the president of the Fairbanks college provides an insight into the life of a hardball politician. Yet, his political skills featured a less common ability to set aside the past and move forward, he seemed to learn to work with Bunnell as a regent for several years after the failed coup. He did not seem to hold grudges and he stayed true to his family, fairs and farming themes. He remained married

to the same woman his entire adult life. In his last years he seemed like a gentle prophet for fairs and farming in Alaska and his community gave him affectionate recognition for his efforts.

Snodgrass would probably be disappointed to discover that the Matanuska Valley that he had once described as "Eden," has been transformed from a farming area into suburban sprawl. On the other hand, he would undoubtedly be pleased to know that a college had been founded near the experiment station he had selected with a hall named after his family - "Snodgrass Hall."

1. George W. Gasser and Lorin T. Oldroyd, "University of Alaska Experiment Station-Extension Service" (Scholarly paper/lecture, Fairbanks: University of Alaska Fairbanks, 27 March, 1940), 1-2.

2. *Matanuska Valley Record*, March, 1952.

3. *United States Department of Agriculture Appointment*, Snodgrass Papers, 5 April 1907, Box 1, Folder 1916.

4. Alice Snodgrass, interview by author, 8 June 2001, Palmer.

5. Evangeline Atwood and Robert N. DeArmond, *Who's Who in Alaskan Politics* (Portland: Binford & Mort, 1977), 35-36. Janice T. Hanscom, Glenn Allen and Meriam G. Karlsson, "Charles Christian Georgeson - A Man with a Vision," *Agroborealis*, Vol. 24, No. 1, 1992, 21.

6. *Ibid.*, 11.

7. *Ibid.*, 21 & 23.

8. *Matanuska Valley Record*, March, 1952.

9. *Ibid.*, 5, 8, 9.

10. *Ibid.*, 9.

11. *Ibid.*, 9.

12. *Map of Station at Kenai*, Snodgrass Papers, Box 1, Folder 1916.

13. *Matanuska Valley Record*, March, 1952.
14. Gasser and Oldroyd, "University of Alaska Experiment Station-Extension Service," 2.
15. Wanda Marie Fields, *Now It Can Be Told: Stories of Alaskan Pioneer Ranchers* (Anchorage: PC, 2000), 33. It should be noted that Snodgrass's own recollection in the March, 1952 issue of the *Matanuska Valley Record* places his arrival in Kodiak a week earlier than Fields.
16. *Ibid.*, 34.
17. Contrary to the information provided by Wanda Marie Fields, the biographer of Hannah Breece provided a diary entry by Hannah Breece that suggests Snodgrass may have told her he thought the herd was from Missouri. See: Jane Jacobs, *A Schoolteacher in Old Alaska, The Story of Hannah Breece* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 52.
18. *Ibid.*
19. Department of Agriculture, *Annual Report of Alaska Agricultural Experiment Stations for 1907* "Report on Livestock Breeding at Kodiak Station," by M.D. Snodgrass, (Washington, D.C.: U.S. GPO, 1908), 59.
20. *Ibid.*
21. Jane Jacobs, *A Schoolteacher in Old Alaska, The story of Hannah Breece* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 52.
22. *Ibid.*, 3.
23. *Ibid.*
24. Department of Agriculture, *Annual Report of Alaska Agricultural Experiment Stations for 1908* "Report of the Work at the Kodiak Live-stock and Breeding Station," by M.D. Snodgrass (Washington, D.C.: U.S. GPO, 1909), 59.
25. *Matanuska Valley Record*, December, 1952.
26. *Ibid.*
27. *Ibid.*, 4.
28. *Ibid.*, 63.
29. Department of Agriculture, *Annual Report of Alaska Agricultural Experiment Stations for 1910* "Survey of Alaska Lands," (Washington, D.C.: U.S. GPO, 1911), 65.
30. George W. Gasser and Lorin T. Oldroyd, "University of Alaska Experiment Station-Extension Service," 2.
31. Department of Agriculture, *Annual Report of Alaska Agricultural Experiment Stations for 1912* "Report of Work at Kodiak Live-stock and Breeding Station, Results of Eruption of Mount Katmai," by M.D. Snodgrass (Washington, D.C.: U.S. GPO, 1913), 69.

32. Judith Kleinfeld, "How the Frontier Imagery of the Alaskan North Shapes the People Who Come," *The Northern Review* 27 (Fall 2007), 50.
33. Department of Agriculture, *Annual Report of Alaska Agricultural Experiment Stations for 1915* "Report of Work at Kodiak Live-stock and Breeding Station," by M.D. Snodgrass (Washington, D.C.: U.S. GPO, 1916), 82.
34. Department of Agriculture, *Annual Report of Alaska Agricultural Experiment Stations for 1914* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. GPO, 1915), 41-42.
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38. George W. Gasser and Lorin T. Oldroyd, "University of Alaska Experiment Station-Extension Service," 2.
39. M.D. Snodgrass to Brother Birch and family, Snodgrass Papers, 16 January 1913, Box 1, 1913 Folder.
40. M.D. Snodgrass to J.R. Miller, Dean of Kansas State College Extension Department, Snodgrass Papers, 13 March, 1913, Box 1, Folder 1913.
41. Edwin Johnson to M.D. Snodgrass, Snodgrass Papers, 4 February 1913, Box 1, 1913 Folder.
42. Edwin Johnson to M.D. Snodgrass, Snodgrass Papers, 24 March 1915, Box 1, 1915 Folder.
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112. Ibid., 32.

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118. *The Valley Settler*, 17 November 1939.

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122. *Seventh Annual Fair of the Matanuska Valley Fair Association, Inc.*, (Palmer, Alaska: August 30, 31, September 1, 1947), inside cover.
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126. Noel Kopperud, interview by author, 5 August 2001, Palmer.
127. D.L. Pollock, interview by author, Palmer.
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Chapter 4

Snodgrass the Politician

M.D. Snodgrass was 41 years old when he arrived in Fairbanks, Alaska in 1917. The only hint that he might one day be a leader was his brief tenure as a captain in the Kansas Infantry. Yet, by 1925 he had served as territorial senator, college trustee, territorial education board member and newspaper columnist. The opportunities of the Alaska frontier with its sparse population and nascent social structure allowed the hardworking federal bureaucrat and farmer Snodgrass to assume positions of influence that likely would not have been open to him back in Kansas.

In retrospect, Snodgrass's rise as a public personality in his early Alaska years became a lifelong burden. He would never again have the public stature that he attained in the 1920s. He spent most of the next thirty years trying to reacquire some of that influence. Only once, in 1952, was he able to win another territorial election, then to the House. The frontier setting which enabled him to rise swiftly to prominence in several areas at once was perhaps too generous for his own good. The early simultaneous successes as a community leader, legislator, and trustee in Fairbanks over extended his energies and probably contributed to some of the setbacks he encountered in those endeavors.

4.1 Frontier Setting - Adventure or Destination?

Ten years before he lived in Fairbanks, Snodgrass had made Kodiak Island his home. In 1907, Alaska was an unlikely destination for a farmer and a family man. When Snodgrass came to Alaska, single male fortune hunters dominated the territory. Most of

the stampeders who came to Alaska and the Yukon between 1898 and 1907 did not stay. A vision of adventure drove many participants to the gold rushes in search of wealth. They did not see Alaska as a home or destination, but rather an opportunity enroute to life elsewhere. A competing vision drove Snodgrass to see Alaska as home for permanent family farming on a large scale. His passion for his agrarian vision combined with the absence of an established political elite in the territory propelled him into positions of influence in early Alaskan higher education, journalism and politics.

The stage had been set for Snodgrass by 40 years of federal government neglect of the territory before he arrived in Kodiak in 1907. Although Alaska was a territory it was not treated in the same manner as other territories. In those four decades, the federal government departed from established territorial governance procedures when it created and implemented for Alaska: an Organic Act in 1884, homestead laws in 1898, a criminal code in 1899, a civil code in 1900 and subsequent modifications to territorial laws in 1905, 1906 and 1912. These steps were all deviations from the established norms of American federal governance of territories. Other territories had been given the tools for self-government and a clear path to statehood from the inception of their creation. However, history had altered the nature of American territorial acquisitions. The Spanish American War of 1898 had provided the United States with an overseas empire and a significant number of non-Caucasian subjects. Prevailing racial and cultural prejudices, combined with minimal to non-existent personal knowledge of Alaska, motivated the United States Congress to treat newly acquired overseas territories and their inhabitants in a manner more consistent with the ancient Roman assumptions that

some people required “unlimited and unconditional” external rule.¹

Alaska, as a non-contiguous territory, was placed in the same governance model with the Philippines. The traditional procedure of establishing a territorial political system that would have rapidly led to statehood had been put on hold in the case of Alaska and the other newly acquired non-contiguous territories of the United States such as Hawaii. Such a change in governance policy was a departure from established American traditions stemming from the Enlightenment and American Revolutionary principles. Political historian Alpheus Snow depicted the congressional Ordinance of 1787 for the Government of the Northwest Territory as the result of a careful balancing act between concerns for the “rights of man” and retention of enough control over territories to avoid their secession. Territories could not be permitted to evolve into independent, competing, even hostile states, so they could not have complete autonomy. At the same time participatory democracy with limited self government and the incentive of likely admission into the union was encouraged. Accordingly, Congress established a minimal threshold population formula (until 1800, a population of 60,000 was a prerequisite for statehood) to encourage self-government and the evolution towards statehood as soon as possible. American leaders did not want their administration of territories to appear to be the same as British colonial rule of the American colonies.²

Extending the “rights of man,” including popular democracy, to Alaska was problematic in 1867 because a Civil War ending slavery had not ended racial stereotypes. The overwhelming majority of Alaska’s population in 1867 was Native and not considered capable of self-government. Indeed, the Treaty of 1867 with Russia

specifically included a provision that directed the United States Congress to determine: “The civil rights and political status of the native inhabitants of the territories.” In 1900, historian Max Farrand described Alaska with “its inhospitable climate, the difficulty of developing such resources as it might prove to have, and especially its scanty population [that] was so largely composed of uncivilized Indians, all of which tended to render it extremely improbable that this region would ever sufficiently develop to be organized as a state.”³

The presidency of Theodore Roosevelt reinforced this perspective on Alaska and Native Alaskans. The political destiny of Alaska became linked to the governance of overseas territories which the United States had occupied after the Spanish American War. Accordingly, Alaska became part of what some scholars label the “Third Empire” or “Oceanic Empire.” Prevailing racial assumptions of the early 1900s made the United States Congress reluctant to “entrust native peoples with republican institutions, except under close supervision” in American Samoa, Guam and the Philippines. Alaska’s “transient and unruly” population was treated in a similar fashion. Snodgrass arrived in Alaska at a time when imperial philosophy had denied the establishment of institutions such as a legislature that would have created a political elite.⁴

Theodore Roosevelt, who was president when Snodgrass arrived in Alaska, embodied and presided over the transition of the United States from a continental nation to a global power. The Spanish American War of 1898 was the actual and symbolic event that represented that change. Snodgrass was a willing supporter and volunteer in that war when he joined Company M of the 22nd Kansas Volunteers. He was also a

willing beneficiary and participant in the political evolution of American imperial expansion.⁵

Prior to Snodgrass's arrival federal homestead policies in the North had influenced Alaska's demographics. The generous land policies that had hastened the development of the American West had been changed for Alaska. President McKinley and the 55th United States Congress had extended homestead laws to Alaska in 1898, with two crucial alterations. In Alaska, a homestead was to be 80, not 160 acres and the cost of a survey was an obligation imposed on the homesteader. Historian Jeannette Paddock Nichols asserted that the survey cost for would-be homesteaders effectively "debarred the poor man from homesteading."⁶ Historian Frederick Jackson Turner had made the observation that the "most significant thing" about settling the frontier was "free land."⁷ Snodgrass, himself a product of a family that had participated in the westward migration of people in search of land (from Indiana to Kansas) would have understood Jackson's premise that America's frontier expansion required the lure of "free land". Ironically, the homestead policies for Alaska that Snodgrass later criticized were part of the reason why there were fewer people and more opportunities for him when he arrived.⁸

Farming in Alaska in 1907 was fundamentally flawed by the absence of farm families, or more precisely, farm wives. Before World War I, most of the farmers in the Fairbanks and Matanuska Valleys were single men. Often they were aging former miners who wanted to settle down and attempted to do so with a farm homestead. A Snodgrass contemporary farmer, friend and later political rival in Fairbanks, Paul J. Rickert, even helped organize the 1924 Tanana Valley Fair around the theme of "Get Married at the

Tanana Valley Fair.” The effort to domesticate local bachelor farmers at the fair failed.⁹ The result was hardly surprising given the improbability of instant romance compounded by the absence of women in a time when 80 percent of the population in most gold rush towns in Alaska was male to start with.¹⁰

The shortcoming of the 80 acre tract limit combined with high survey costs prompted Congress to make a dramatic adjustment five years later in 1903, when homesteaders in Alaska were permitted to stake up to 320 acres. The new rules still required some improvement work by the homesteaders but “in no way deterred men from taking up land wherever suitable” if they could arrange for the surveying of the property.¹¹ That implied result, that single men would be able to simply grab land for speculation rather than development troubled Snodgrass when he later tried to recruit settlers. Eventually, he unsuccessfully attempted to alter Alaska’s limited homestead laws to reduce homestead acreage in order to attract desirable new settlers as opposed to “land grabbers.”¹² He had observed extensive homesteading in the Matanuska Valley before 1920 when the railroad came through and then, unable to dispose of their lands at a profit, most of the single “homesteaders” departed shortly thereafter.¹³

4.2 Present at the Creation

M.D. Snodgrass found himself in the position of being something of an “old-timer” in Alaska before laws and government were established. Alaska’s retarded governmental evolution had resulted in an opportunity for Snodgrass. He had had enough time to develop self-confidence in the Alaskan setting and felt prepared to take advantage of the chance to participate in the creation of a functioning government.

Besides an imperfect homestead law, comprehensive laws on criminal and civil conduct were entirely missing at the turn of the century. Historian Jeanette Paddock Nichols noted that Congress had “never before done such a thing as make special codes of civil and criminal laws for a territory,” yet that is exactly what it did for Alaska.¹⁴ In response to the great Klondike Gold Rush of 1898 and the first serious migration of non-Native people to Alaska, Congress passed the Criminal Code of 1899 and the Civil Code the next year. As Jeannette Nichols pointed out in her political history of Alaska, in 1900 the territory had three major towns in the southeast “without any legal form of municipal government” and Congress realized that some type of civil code was needed.¹⁵

The Civil Code rapidly followed the Criminal Code and the editor of the compiled codes, Senator Thomas Carter, noted the three acts in succession providing for homestead rules in 1898, a Criminal Code in 1899 and a Civil Code in 1900 were a result of Congress finally becoming “deeply impressed with the growing importance of Alaska and thoroughly conscious of its duty to that long-neglected part of our possessions.”¹⁶ Carter also correctly anticipated that the creation of the codes would rapidly advance the popular election of a delegate to Congress and a territorial legislature.¹⁷ Congress also expanded the Alaska court system from one to three judicial districts. Alaska had no transportation infrastructure and Congress therefore addressed the issue in 1905 by creating a road commission.

A non-voting congressional delegate had been a standard feature of most other territories immediately upon their creation. The Dakotas, Kansas and Nevada had all been established as territories before Alaska, and all had been granted a delegate to

Congress in their original Organic Acts.¹⁸ Alaska had been a territory for almost four decades before election of a delegate was permitted. Under the tenure of President Theodore Roosevelt, Alaska was finally permitted a non-voting delegate to Congress. Jeanette Nichols described the passage of the delegate bill as the “Birth of Alaska Politics.”¹⁹ Finally, Alaskans would have someone to vote for or against and naturally, political organization and leadership became features of the new polity. Snodgrass arrived the year after the “birth of Alaska politics” and accordingly, although a newcomer, he entered into a political arena where he stood on essentially equal political footing with most longterm Alaskans. A political leadership group was forming and he became a part of that leadership in a remarkably short time.

At some level, Snodgrass probably realized that the multitude of career and life opportunities available to him in Alaska in the early 1900s were not likely to be found elsewhere in the United States. For example, Snodgrass’ original home state of Indiana had been granted a local elected “assembly” in 1800, the very same year it had been recognized as a territory.²⁰ Accordingly, like most of the territories in the first century of the American Empire (Territory ruled by the first states as defined by Jack Eblen), Indiana established a local oligarchy which tended to dominate politics to the exclusion²¹ of subsequent settlers. Most western territories had established local government in a similar feudal patronage manner where the appointed governor in turn appointed the first officials to newly established counties. For example, in New Mexico, Territorial Governor Miguel Otero wrote a lively history of his tenure, describing how political party bosses battled him over who was to select names for plum territorial political

appointments to newly established county governments before the first elections.²²

Unlike Indiana, New Mexico and other earlier territories, Alaska had no provision for local political offices, let alone elections to any local office within the territory, until 1905. A local “ruling class” was accordingly retarded in its evolution. Although there clearly were some localized oligarchies in parts of the territory, they had been unable to translate their economic clout into territory-wide political power in the period before Snodgrass came to Alaska. The size of Alaska’s land mass alone always made territory-wide political control difficult.

There had been at least one serious attempt to organize Southeastern Alaskan political forces before the 1905 election of an Alaskan delegate to Congress. In fact, Snodgrass arrived in Alaska just one year after the extended tenure of Gov. John Brady, whose term of service ended on March 2, 1906. Brady had had the potential to be a capable and stable leader with a real following. Brady had been connected with the fabled “Presbyterian” political power bloc that had dominated Southeastern Alaska since the 1880s. Indeed, Brady had come to Alaska as a Presbyterian missionary to work under the dynamic leadership of missionary Sheldon Jackson. Jackson’s political clout at the federal level was significant and Jackson had lobbied President Benjamin Harrison for Brady’s appointment as territorial governor as early as 1889. Eventually, President William McKinley named Brady Governor of Alaska in 1897. Jackson was the federal Agent of Education for Alaska at the same time. Any real “Presbyterian” political machine disappeared when Brady became embroiled in a financial scandal with the Reynolds-Alaska Development Company (a front for a sham resource development

corporation which attracted investors with prominent endorsements from people like Governor Brady) which led to Brady's premature resignation and departure from Alaska. Had Brady not become embroiled in a scandal, Snodgrass would have been well situated to join forces with Brady, as Snodgrass was both a Presbyterian and a Republican.

Yet the disarray left by the collapse of the Brady coalition only further leveled the political playing field for a newcomer like Snodgrass. A new settler, Wilford B. Hoggatt, became Alaska's new governor. Although Hoggatt and Snodgrass were both federal employees, their visions for Alaska could hardly have been more different. Historian Jeannette Nichols summarized Governor Hoggatt's perspective on Alaska as lacking "faith in the interior except as a temporary residence of the placer miner and he regarded the agriculture of Alaska as moonshine."²³ Hoggatt was in Juneau when Mr. & Mrs. Snodgrass stepped off the steamer *Santa Clara* in Seward in 1907 to begin several Alaskan adventures almost all of which pertained to the advancement of agriculture in Alaska. Both men were Republicans, but Snodgrass made a career of promoting Alaska as a permanent home for families and farmers not transient miners.

In fact, Snodgrass had applied to and the United States Department of Agriculture had hired him on April 5, 1907 to go to Alaska for \$1,200.00 per year to work "for the establishment and maintenance of an Agricultural Experiment Station in Alaska."²⁴ Indeed, Snodgrass spent most of his first decade in Alaska working in Kenai and Kodiak to create an environment suitable for small farm families like his own, and his family grew rapidly there, with five children born by 1917.

Snodgrass quickly and clearly understood the substantial obstacles to farming in

Alaska, but he did not give up easily. He closed the experiment station in Kenai in 1908. He struggled to keep the Kodiak station in operation even after several feet of ash from the great Katmai eruption of 1912 forced him to relocate the entire station dairy herd to Washington for a year.

Alaska was not permitted a territorial legislature until that same year (1912), 45 years after the United States had purchased it from Russia. As noted above, Nevada was permitted an elected territorial legislature in 1861, the same year the territory was created.²⁵ Thus Snodgrass became a part of the new territorial legislature just seven years after it was created. This was all the more remarkable because not only was he relatively new to Alaska, but he had been in Fairbanks for only three years before he was elected as a senator. It was a classic example of a frontier offering “easy entry and less competition” for an individual with initiative.²⁶ Snodgrass had learned to take risks and experience the rewards that were possible.

Less than two years after that he had left Fairbanks and moved his family to the Matanuska Valley. What place Snodgrass would have regarded as “home” was probably unclear to even his own family. Between 1915 and 1925 Snodgrass, and sometimes his whole family, moved six times, from Kenai to Kodiak to Washington State (to save the Kodiak experiment station cattle from the Katmai eruption) to Fairbanks to Juneau and finally Matanuska. In that same period he worked as a federal civil servant, a private farmer, a territorial senator and a university regent. He was often physically separated from his family for months at a time through a decade of constant physical relocations and employment changes. The stress and excitement of the opportunities that came his

way apparently convinced him that Alaska was to be his permanent home. After 1920 there are no indications that he contemplated leaving Alaska.

In the meantime, even though Alaska was permitted a territorial legislature in 1912, it was limited in power in a manner unprecedented in American territorial history. Nevertheless, Alaskans could finally vote to elect their own territorial leaders. Snodgrass was always interested and engaged in the larger world around him regardless of how remote his personal residence might have been. Writing to his brother Birch in 1913, he assessed the national Democratic victory of 1912. He concluded that the ascension of President Woodrow Wilson would probably not alter the personnel or work of the Alaska Agricultural Experiment Stations.²⁷ Although he had been in the territory less than six years, Snodgrass had already formed loyalties and opinions about Alaska issues.

Before moving to Fairbanks in 1917 Snodgrass had lived in a social vacuum. The experiment station at Kalsin Bay on Kodiak Island was not near Kodiak or any other town of significance. Working long hours on a remote farm site was hardly the standard launching pad for a political career. The absence of social interaction, however, did not prevent him from developing political opinions.

4.3 A Wickersham Man

Snodgrass aligned his views with political maverick Judge James Wickersham, which made it possible for him to cast himself not just as a “Republican” but rather as a “progressive” (as Wickersham Republicans often distinguished themselves from other Republicans). Snodgrass participated in Republican party politics throughout his life in Alaska, but he recognized the need to reach beyond his party base as a politician. On at

least one occasion as a candidate he encouraged voters to look beyond party lines.²⁸ This tendency to avoid strict partisan alignment would remain a characteristic of Alaska's political culture. Political scientists Gerald McBeath and Thomas Morehouse observed that even after statehood, as late as 1994, Alaskan "partisan ties are weak to the point of nonexistence."²⁹ Snodgrass' own political life confirmed that even among partisan political leaders, flexibility on matters of party loyalty had a history that extended back to at least the end of the nineteenth century in Alaska.

It can be argued that much of Alaska's political instability in the first part of the twentieth century emanated from the dominating presence of Judge Wickersham. Wickersham had served as a federal judge in Eagle and Fairbanks in the immediate aftermath of the great turn of the century Dawson and Nome gold rushes. He had immersed himself in politics, and Alaskans elected him their delegate to the U.S. Congress in 1908. He was controversial, at times inconsistent, and always outspoken. Politicians across the territory were labeled on the basis of whether they were "pro-Wick" or "anti-Wick" in spite of the ambiguous nature of what Wickersham himself actually stood for and his own fleeting party loyalties. Snodgrass was no exception and firmly in the "pro-Wick" camp. Indeed, at a time when Wickersham's own position was most in jeopardy as a result of the close, contested and disputed results of the 1916 and 1918 races for delegate against William Sulzer, Snodgrass became a key player in a Wickersham power play for control of the new college in Fairbanks.

In 1913, Snodgrass wrote to his brother that the progressives had been defeated by "The combined forces of the Interests with the Democrats".³⁰ The "Interests" appear to

have been a reference to “The Alaska Syndicate” which was a complex collection of massive business operations controlled by the Guggenheim family and J.P. Morgan and Company.³¹ Snodgrass, like many Alaskans, was suspicious of large corporate operations in Alaska even though he was always a Republican. His political views had been formed in rural Kansas during a period when the state was dominated by progressive politics. The popular politicians of the late 1890s and early 1900s were three time presidential candidate Democrat William Jennings Bryan and Republican President Theodore Roosevelt who railed against the enormous concentration of wealth among a few industrialists. The Republican party eventually divided on the issue of deference to the industrial oligarchy with Roosevelt on the progressive side and President William Howard Taft on the more conservative side. Snodgrass belonged to the Roosevelt wing of the party.

It has been argued that Wickersham’s populist, anti-big business platform probably undermined the substantial appeal of the early Socialist Party of America in Alaska.³² Wickersham usually ran as a Republican, however, there were times when the Republicans ran against him. Snodgrass exemplified Wickersham’s ability to draw on support from progressive Republican voters who would otherwise have voted for a traditional Republican.

Although Snodgrass’s consistent association with the Wickersham progressive Republicans appeared to have gotten off to a losing start in the first territorial legislative elections when Democrats won most of the elections, his political fortunes increasingly improved in the following decade. He was a new character in a newly forming Alaskan

Republican Party and he rose through the ranks rapidly. The Snodgrass family moved to the Fairbanks experiment station in 1917 and although it was still a few miles from town, M.D. became a part of the social life of Fairbanks. After a decade of comparative isolation on Kodiak Island, life in Fairbanks seemed cosmopolitan.

America's entry into World War I brought out some visceral sentiments in Snodgrass that stood in contrast to his comparatively tolerant opinions near the end of World War II. In a letter to friends in November 1917 Snodgrass speculated about the conclusion of the war: "Am expecting some interesting times in Europe before the war comes to a close. Some of the active pro-German workers in the states should be gathered up soon and given a little of what is due them."³³ In correspondence to his family in Seward while he was in Fairbanks, Snodgrass wrote at length on patriotic duty, confidence in the leadership of President Woodrow Wilson and even support for key elements of what would eventually be a part of Wilson's Fourteen Points at the end of the war. "Disarmament can come only when the world powers will join a league for peace and allow only police powers jointly for all nations."³⁴ Throughout his career, Snodgrass, the Republican, was able to recognize the possibility that good ideas and qualities could also be found among Democrats like President Wilson.

After the United States had entered World War I, Snodgrass, the veteran of the Spanish American War felt the patriotic urge to enlist. In 1918, he sought a captain's commission by applying to what he called an "Officers Training Camp".³⁵ Snodgrass had been in Alaska for barely ten years, yet his political activities had developed to the point where he was able to host newly appointed Alaska Governor Thomas Riggs and his wife for

dinner at his home. There he discussed with the governor his idea of pursuing a captain's commission in the war effort.³⁶ Snodgrass' plan to be an officer, however, was denied because his application was seven days late and he was two years older than the age limit of forty.³⁷

4.4 The First Attempt to be President of the Agricultural College and School of Mines

In 1919 Snodgrass was involved in the establishment of the new land grant college in Fairbanks. It was his first notable political fight. He became embroiled in Wickersham's effort to control the leadership of the newly established college. Wickersham had first introduced legislation to provide a land grant for the establishment of an agricultural college and school of mines in 1915. On May 3, 1917, territorial Governor J.F.A. Strong signed a bill establishing the college and funding to begin construction.

The story of Snodgrass attempting to become president of the new college and that failing, becoming a key player in a political effort to remove President Charles Bunnell did not reflect particularly well on Snodgrass, but it demonstrated how rapidly he developed important political connections.

In 1919 the new college in Fairbanks selected its first president and Snodgrass was an unsuccessful applicant. In his application letter, Snodgrass suggests his own appointment as "Acting President" for a two year term and that "at the expiration of that time a regular President be chosen, from among the members of the faculty if suitable material is at hand."³⁸ Snodgrass proposed his main duty would be to travel across the

United States to recruit a faculty and purchase equipment for the new college. He emphasized his own agricultural background and stated: "I have the interest of the institution at heart and fully realize the possibilities confronting such a school in Alaska, *I realize the School of Mines is perhaps the more popular with the average Alaskan, but this idea I am sure comes from the lack of acquaintance with Agricultural schools.* (emphasis added). It is my belief that both the mining industry and the Agricultural development should go hand in hand, for the best interest of Alaska.³⁹"

Charles Bunnell was the successful applicant, which set the stage for a complex political fight. Bunnell was a prominent Democrat and federal judge. He was also an enemy of James Wickersham. Wickersham strongly opposed Bunnell's appointment to the presidency of the Alaska Agricultural College and School of Mines. Republican Wickersham regarded Democrat Bunnell as a partisan adversary and did not want him in any position of authority. Later, with the 1920 election of Warren G. Harding as President of the United States, Wickersham had an opportunity to correct what he perceived to be a serious mistake by the College Trustees.

It is interesting to speculate on what the Alaska Agricultural College and School of Mines might have become had Snodgrass been selected. He did not conceal his bias for agriculture over mining. His recruiting the first faculty from agricultural colleges and designing the curriculum accordingly may well have resulted in an entirely different institution.

Snodgrass had applied for the office of college president while still employed by the federal government at the experiment station and apparently had acted without

directly notifying his supervisor, C.C. Georgeson. Snodgrass was becoming increasingly frustrated with what he considered an inadequate federal salary, and he felt greater opportunities awaited someone of his training. He firmly believed the experiment station limited his potential as both a farmer and politician. By the spring of 1921 he resigned from the federal government to pursue his options as an independent farmer and politician.

With the election of President Warren G. Harding after the administration of Democrat Woodrow Wilson, there was, as usual, a collection of federal appointments to be made in Alaska. Snodgrass had achieved enough prominence to become a reference or supporter for certain individuals seeking such positions. He wrote one such letter to Arthur Capper, a United States Senator from Kansas, with whom Snodgrass apparently had no connection other than the fact that he had lived in Kansas before he had come to Alaska. In writing a reference letter for Paul J. Rickert, a prosperous Fairbanks farmer, to be appointed U.S. Marshall for the 4th Judicial District, Snodgrass provided evidence of his leanings on the issue of prohibition. He lamented the inability or unwillingness of the Democrat-appointed U.S. Marshall to enforce prohibition. He also attributed the ability of “wet forces” to control “Divisional Committeemen” in local government positions to “the most underhanded methods I have ever known to be practiced.”⁴⁰ Snodgrass named Charles Beam as the corrupt Fairbanks leader of the Republican committeemen who apparently made recommendations for local federal appointments. Snodgrass declared that as a group they were “products of the vise [sic] of prostitution and saloons combined” and that Beam himself “runs a hotel and allows gambling to go

on openly in defiance to law.”⁴¹ Snodgrass appealed to the Kansas Republican senator for help because he was himself originally from Kansas and a Republican but opposed to the local Fairbanks Republican leadership which he considered corrupt.

Snodgrass had been in Fairbanks less than three years when he wrote to Senator Capper. Perhaps he had become active and outspoken on prostitution because he had just moved his wife and children to Fairbanks and found the atmosphere contrary to the best interests of a young family.

4.5 The Second Attempt to become College President

In 1921, President Harding appointed Scott Bone the new governor of Alaska. Bone became a “pro-Wick” force and Wickersham then set into motion a plan to use the new governor’s appointment powers to remove his political adversary, Charles Bunnell, from the presidency of the Alaska Agricultural College and School of Mines. Wickersham’s plan was to replace Bunnell with Snodgrass, whom Governor Bone in the interim had appointed as Trustee.⁴² Wickersham’s candid November 6, 1921 diary entry regarding the plan provides a rare glimpse into the details of raw political manipulation:

We have a plan to undo the Democratic scheme of fastening Bunnell upon the Fairbanks Agr. College as President - The Governor (Bone) is assisting - he appointed Lavery and Bloom (Republicans) at my request - he urged me at the last moment to take one of the places. Now we have Lavery, Bloom, Stevens and Snodgrass - sure - and probably - all of whom are Republicans and our friends.

The plan outlined in my letter first submitted to the Governor and approved by him, is now to hold a meeting of the Board of Trustees and reconsider the former actions of the Board electing Bunnell and to hold that since he is yet Judge of the District Court yet, to declare the office vacant and elect Snodgrass in his place.⁴³

With this scheme, Snodgrass had his second chance to be president of the college. He

was no longer a federal employee, but rather an independent farmer.

In December, 1921 Snodgrass voted to remove Bunnell, but Stevens failed to support the effort and Bunnell remained president.⁴⁴ Interestingly, trustee Paul Rickert, whom Snodgrass had recommended for U.S. Marshall, also voted for Bunnell pitting himself against Snodgrass. The next year Rickert unsuccessfully opposed Snodgrass in his bid to be a territorial senator, deepening the rift between the two. Bloom later made the improbable claim that Snodgrass had not really wanted the position of college president.⁴⁵ Two years later Trustee Morton Stevens (who had supported Bunnell but claimed to have only done so because “the motion had been lost before my name was called”) wrote to Governor Bone expressing surprise and suspicion about a 1923 vote by Bloom, Lavery and Snodgrass to increase the salary of Bunnell.⁴⁶ Stevens raised the possibility that the three voted for the salary increase because “Mr. Snodgrass is unquestionably a standing applicant for such office.”⁴⁷ There would be no third attempt by Snodgrass to become the president of the college.

The second failed attempt to become president of the college is perhaps the most vivid example of how the frontier changed M.D. Snodgrass. He was no longer the low profile newlywed from Kansas happy to have a government job at the experiment station in Alaska. Ten years in Alaska had made Snodgrass a serious contender for the presidency of the college, who was not averse to behind the scenes machinations that might win him a position of influence. He had become a serious risk taker.

4.6 Senator Snodgrass

In 1922, two of four territorial senate seats were open in the Fourth Judicial

Division which ran across central Alaska from Bethel to Chicken. The division included 50 voting precincts, of which only two (Fairbanks and Nenana) produced more than 100 voters and most of the rest had less than 20 votes cast. Snodgrass ran against Paul J. Rickert, whom he had nominated for U.S. Marshall in 1921 for the "Short term" (2 years) seat. Rickert had opposed Governor Bone and Snodgrass in their unsuccessful effort to oust President Bunnell from the college. The election was the end of what had been a short friendship. Snodgrass outpolled Rickert 900 votes to 622. Snodgrass won in 40 of the 50 far flung precincts, including the two largest precincts, Fairbanks and Nenana. By 1923, Snodgrass was a Territorial Senator as well as a college trustee.

Snodgrass felt pretty good in the month before the election and having failed twice to become president of the new college apparently did not reduce his desire to play the prankster at the opening of the college. In the midst of the closing days of his senate campaign the Alaska Agricultural College and School of Mines flag pole was suddenly missing just before the formal opening ceremonies on September 18, 1922 . The

Fairbanks News-Miner ran the following editorial column:

A Flagpole for the College
Now I ask you, how can a feller run up
a flag when he has no flagpole?

The College had no flagpole and no
money to buy one. They gotta have a flagpole.

M.D. Snodgrass knows where there is a
flagpole. We didn't ask him where it is,
for it's none of our business.

If a feller has a flagpole and hasn't
sense enough or interest to day-herd and

night-herd it - he ought to lose it.

M.D. Snodgrass offered to go out before
daylight this morning and snare it.
Ain't that right?

It must be painted before its put up -
Some color to prevent the owner from knowing
that it is his flagpole.

President Bunnell knows where some feller
has left a can of white paint and a brush.

Then we are short handed for raising the pole -
So I promised, if necessary, to go to Bert
Stevens, the US Marshal, and borrow a
murderer and a couple of bootleggers from his
boarding house across the street.⁴⁸

The entire story behind the poem may never be known, but M.D. is clearly understood to be responsible for the missing flag pole and apparently sought attention for the stunt. Judging by the testy references to Snodgrass in the correspondence by President Bunnell to others regarding the college trustees in that same time period, the prank may not have amused all present. Yet, the tone of the poem in the paper is good natured and does not suggest the episode was seen as childish or malicious by the newspaper editor.

4.7 Juneau

Like most of the other lawmakers, Snodgrass went to Juneau without his family. Only two of the eight senators (Fred M. Ayer of Nome and Anthony J. Dimond of Valdez) were on record as accompanied by their wives. Snodgrass and four of the other senators lived in the Gastineau Hotel.⁴⁹ Snodgrass had already experienced several

months of separation from his wife and children when he had been sent to Fairbanks while they waited in Seward in 1917. The 1923 legislative session again separated him from his family and may have influenced his not filing for re-election in 1924. In the meantime, he translated his agricultural passions into legislative priorities.

On April 16, 1923, Senator Snodgrass introduced Senate Bill No. 103 which provided funding for Annual Territorial Fairs and the stimulation of “interest in agricultural development, home economics, manufacturing and mining”.⁵⁰ He referred to that minor legislative success with pride until the end of his life. Ironically, his defeated opponent, Paul J. Rickert, used those funds to gain credit for the founding of the Tanana Valley Fair the next year in 1924.⁵¹

Another of Snodgrass’s legislative efforts was to weaken the control of outside interests in Alaska’s fishing industry, though it was unsuccessful. On April 30, 1923, Governor Bone vetoed Senate Joint Resolution No. 2 which instructed the Attorney General to challenge the existing fisheries reserve system and “defend and render secure the common right of fisheries”.⁵² Snodgrass was one of five senators who voted 5-3 to override the veto; however those votes were insufficient, as a two thirds majority was required for a successful override.⁵³ His vote reflected an underlying populist leaning in Snodgrass’ political thinking. The fishing industry in Alaska in 1923 was part of the “outside” corporate interest power block that Wickersham and his followers so frequently vilified.

Another populist position he took was the only time he supported Alaska Native rights during his political tenure. In his six decades in Alaska Snodgrass involved

himself but marginally with the Native peoples of the territory. There is virtually no reference to Native Alaskans in his considerable private, public or official commentary or correspondence. The one exception is the record of his position on Native voting legislation. The episode casts him in a progressive light because, Snodgrass as a Wickersham Republican, opposed literacy legislation designed to prevent Native Alaskans from voting. In that era, Alaskan Tlingit Indians organized politically to support Tlingit William L. Paul, Sr. who became the first Native elected to the territorial legislature. Paul was a Republican and a friend and supporter of Delegate Wickersham. The literacy legislation would have undermined what was then a Republican voting block, so what was in part self-serving for Republicans was also progressive in that the Republican party supported Native voting rights.

This political organization of Native Alaskans was at least partially a by-product of American imperial indifference to governing Alaska in the 1880s. Missionaries came to control the Alaska school system under the oversight of Presbyterian missionary Sheldon Jackson whom President Benjamin Harrison had appointed federal education agent for Alaska. Jackson's cultural immersion policies led in part to the creation of a Native leadership educated and familiar with Caucasian cultural and political institutions. By the 1920s Tlingit attorney, William L. Paul, Sr. came to personify one of the legacies of early Presbyterian missionary effort to culturally assimilate and empower Native Alaskans. Prior to his election to the territorial legislature, Paul had created and organized a Tlingit voting block aligned with Republican delegate James Wickersham.

To increase Native voting, Paul invented a controversial voting tool (cardboard

cutouts to lay on top of a ballot which would cover all but the desired boxes when placed over a ballot) which enabled illiterate Natives to vote in a uniform and effective block.⁵⁴ The racial sentiments of the day and opposition to Wickersham's new power base created a backlash. In 1923 Territorial Representative Frank H. Foster (R Cordova) introduced territorial legislation to institute tests requiring voters be able to demonstrate an ability to read and write English before they could vote.⁵⁵

Such racially targeted legislation was not unique in the United States in the 1920s. In fact Wickersham himself had a rather sordid history of organizing anti-Chinese activities in Tacoma, Washington which resulted in expulsion of Chinese workers from Puget Sound.⁵⁶ What was unique to the Alaska situation was that Alaska's Native population was able to elect one of its own people and garner the support and sympathy of a significant portion of the politically dominant non-Native population. The measure passed the House by a margin of 10 to 6, where Democrats, Independents and Republicans could be counted on both sides of the issue.⁵⁷ Historian Steve Haycox concluded that the votes reflected "personal views rather than partisan considerations".⁵⁸

In the Territorial Senate, Senator M.D. Snodgrass was one of four senators who opposed the legislation, which failed to pass on a 4-4 tie.⁵⁹ Snodgrass was an established Wickersham ally and it is unclear whether he voted to oppose literacy tests for Native voters for partisan reasons or because he was progressive on racial issues. What is clear is that federal neglect of governing Alaska in the 1880s had enabled missionaries to create and encourage a generation of politically savvy Native leaders who were capable of forming effective political alliances with non-Natives in an era when that would have

been improbable in many parts of America. Snodgrass, finding himself in the midst of that process had become a political progressive in action. At a minimum, one can conclude that Snodgrass' private views on race and equality were not so prejudiced as to cause him to break ranks with his allies to oppose progress towards racial equality. By that measure, Snodgrass emerged as a progressive not so bothered by Native voting as to break party ranks as others apparently did. In 1925, after Snodgrass had left the Senate, the literacy test legislation was reintroduced and then a compromise which required literacy tests for new voters but "grandfathered" past illiterate voters passed.

Decades later Snodgrass considered his participation in 5-3 votes to impose graduated taxes on the salmon industry and net profit taxes on the gold and copper industries as perhaps his most important accomplishments, because those actions "placed the Territory on a sound financial basis".⁶⁰ He was also always proud of his introduction of the agriculture fair bill and the amendment to the bovine tuberculosis law that reimbursed owners of infected cattle.

There is nothing particularly outstanding about Snodgrass's two year term as a senator. What he repeatedly referred to as his accomplishments decades later, that is, the fair bill and the bovine tuberculosis bill, were in the final analysis hardly pivotal issues for Alaska. Farming, especially cattle farming, still remains an unimportant economic activity in Alaska almost a hundred years later. The fair bill provided minimal financial assistance to the organization of fairs. Snodgrass himself, after he was out of the legislature, was able to secure the minimal funding permitted by his bill to help start the fair in Palmer. That fair would indeed grow and even thrive over time. Was the

legislation offering the \$1,000.00 seed money essential to creation and survival of the Alaska State Fair? The answer is no, but in 1923, \$1,000 was the equivalent roughly of what Snodgrass had earned in one year as a federal employee. It was significant enough to be very helpful in founding a good fair.

Being a legislator opened other doors for the ambitious 48 year old Mr. Snodgrass. His interest in the college and education caught the attention of Governor Scott Bone. In 1923, the Governor appointed Snodgrass to the Territorial Board of Education for a term to end after the election of 1924 when his senate term expired.⁶¹ Snodgrass did not run for re-election in 1924. Instead, in 1923 he moved his family from Fairbanks to the Matanuska Valley as soon as his senate term ended. It is not clear why he did not seek re-election. Perhaps his family, or more precisely his wife (and their five children) was tired of the extended periods of separation from M.D. He spent the winter in Juneau during the legislative session while his family endured the worst periods of the Fairbanks winter. It is clear that his independent farming venture was unsuccessful. When he had left the experiment station service in 1921 he had done so with the firm conviction that he would prosper financially as a private farmer. To the contrary, he was soon disillusioned and in debt as a farmer, possibly because of his distracting and diverse political activities. Less than two years later his former boss, C.C. Georgeson, rehired him to run the experiment station in Matanuska. Snodgrass had not been pleased with Georgeson when he had resigned in 1921, so it was undoubtedly a bitter pill to go back to the same supervisor, hat in hand, and seek re-employment. It was a tribute to both men that they overcame the memories of their separation in 1921 and learned to work together,

rather well, once again.

Decades later Snodgrass made three unsuccessful attempts to return to the territorial senate in 1944, 1946 and 1958.⁶² Furthermore, he ran for a house seat from the Third Division six times in 1938, 1948, 1950, 1952, 1954 and 1956, winning once in 1952.⁶⁶ It seems unlikely that he would have persisted in his efforts to be elected after several defeats if he had not had the experience of actually winning his very first election.

4.8 The Matanuska Valley

Snodgrass seemed excited about the settlement and farming prospects for the Matanuska Valley. He wrote to his brother Jack, encouraging him to come north to the Matanuska Valley, "These farms can be bought from 1500 to 2000 [dollars] a quarter section and some even less. . . . Jack, you are missing a chance here unless you become interested soon and get a foot hold."⁶⁴

Snodgrass, was always ready to immerse himself in the activities of any community where he settled, no matter how recent his arrival. By November of 1923, after having returned to the Matanuska Valley for only a few months, he helped organize the Matanuska Valley Settlers Association - a farming organization. On November 10, 1923 he convened the organizational meeting of the Association at the Matanuska Experiment Station where he was superintendent. He declared the purpose of the organization would be to lobby the Alaska Railroad and Alaska's Delegate to Congress, Dan Sutherland "requesting them to give attention to the matter of lowering freight rates on livestock and other important matters that might help develop the agricultural industries."⁶⁵

By May 31, 1924, the Matanuska Valley Settlers Association was defunct, but not before freight rates had been reduced. In March of 1924, a railroad official, Captain Hughes, issued a statement showing the railroad responded to the freight issue campaign because it recognized the potential for successful agricultural settlement “each adult farmer (is) worth about \$700.00 a year to the railroad. Enough of (that) kind of farmer would make this railroad pay.”⁶⁶

Snodgrass’s transition from a territorial senator for Fairbanks back to an experiment farm station manager in the Matanuska Valley seemed to have been a rather abrupt career and geographical move. Yet throughout his life, his passion was agriculture and the promotion of family farming in Alaska. Certainly, the Matanuska Valley was to become the showcase for Alaska’s farm “potential,” but he would retain a continuing interest in political affairs as well.

Snodgrass became a frequent columnist and contributor to a succession of Matanuska Valley and Anchorage newspapers over the next thirty years. His articles ranged from two and three page histories of the Alaska experiment stations, the local area and food production, to promotion pieces for the establishment of a fair, to advocacy of moving the capitol to Palmer. His better articles tended to be the historical recollections of his own experiences in the early years of the Alaska experiment farm system. His least meaningful contributions were his often polemical attacks on the administration of the New Deal Colony governance system in the late 1940s. This foray into journalism illustrated Snodgrass’s personal growth in the Alaska frontier. It is improbable that Snodgrass would have even attempted journalism in a non-frontier setting. The can-do

spirit that had become embedded into his attitude had inured him to the possibility that he was not a good writer. The frontier had given him the confidence to do many things, some of them not so well as others.

4.9 End of Service to the Alaska College of Agriculture and School of Mines

In April 1929, Snodgrass' eight year term as a Trustee for the Alaska College of Agriculture and School of Mines ended. The failed effort to install himself as college president clearly clouded his relationship with Bunnell. The June 1923 Minutes of the College Board of Trustees reflect probable lingering tension from the failed attempt to oust Bunnell in 1921, "Mr. Snodgrass asked to be excused from the meeting but was refused permission by the chairman and left over the objection of the chair. The meeting was then without a quorum there remaining only Keys, McIntosh, Mrs. Hess and Stevens."⁶⁷

Snodgrass clearly was frustrated with his tenure on the board because of what he perceived as the partisan nature of board actions and the neglect of agricultural programs in favor of the mining department. Given his own early activities on the board, it is hard to imagine how he could have been surprised at such "politics," yet his own loyalties made him see the actions of the college trustees in a very partisan context. In 1926 he wrote the following impressions to delegate Dan Sutherland (Wickersham's former Nome campaign manager⁶⁸ and successor):

To say that all the FORCES at play in Alaska politics as shown by the manuevers (sic) of Donahue-Dimond-Bunnell-Shonbeck-Markham and your warm political enemies of S.E. Alaska are out to get you is putting it mildly. . . .

At the last Board meeting at the college Mr. Markham paid the President of the College in full for his appointment to the Board, by electing him until his successor shall have been hired, instead of one or two years at a time. It was all so cleverly done that even Tom's most ardent supporters were not fully aware of the meaning of the motion until it was carried. I sometimes feel that it were better if I would get off the Board, and again, it is the only way I can keep informed as to what is going on. It is my plan to work in harmony with the members and try to get the Agricultural Department put on equal basis with the Mining Department of the College.

Whether the Governor [George Parks] was fully aware of the move in getting Markham on the Board I am not informed, but I view the appointments with some misgivings as to the ideals of the governor. Questions of morality, prohibition and decency in Alaska are somewhat clouded. . . .⁶⁹

Snodgrass spent the last several years of his term as a trustee commuting to meetings by rail from the Matanuska rail station near what would later become Palmer. He sent his requests for travel expense reimbursement directly to President Bunnell with brief notes.⁷⁰ These notes give no hint of the strong political opinions he harbored as reflected in his letter to delegate Sutherland. It appeared that Snodgrass did not regard his tenure on the Board of Trustees for the Alaska College of Agriculture and School of Mines as particularly successful. His comments to Sutherland about weighing the option of quitting the Board versus staying on to remain informed may have been more truthful than rhetorical. It seems reasonable to surmise that the heavy-handed and unsuccessful effort to oust Bunnell made the losing side unlikely to accomplish much of anything thereafter. Snodgrass' one consistent and seemingly nonpartisan issue was to advance

the college's support of agriculture to a level at least equal to the mining school.

However his comments to Sutherland suggest that he felt that he did not make any real progress on that issue. The Snodgrass service on the Board of Trustees was a full eight year term. Even so, in his final years he hardly referred to that service, perhaps because he felt he had accomplished little, especially in the area of agriculture.

4.10 The New Deal and Republican Snodgrass Work Together

Oddly enough, however, it was Roosevelt's New Deal that ultimately gave Republican Snodgrass's vision for an Alaska of small family farms its biggest boost. Although Snodgrass was always a Republican loyalist, he was from a Kansas progressive Republican tradition that enabled him to work with Democrats. Accordingly, it is not entirely surprising that he eventually was able to win a majority of the votes in the New Deal town of Palmer in several consecutive elections. In the summer of 1934, Jacob Baker, assistant administrator of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, made a tour of the Matanuska Valley with some Anchorage businessmen and Governor Troy's secretary.⁷¹ This visit marked the beginning of the Matanuska Valley New Deal Colony project. Baker consulted with Snodgrass' boss, O.F. Ohlson of the Alaska Railroad, who in turn appeared to work with or at least discuss several specific ideas on how best to develop an agricultural colony.

Snodgrass prepared a full page article for the *Anchorage Daily Times* setting forth suggestions for prospective agricultural colonists. The article described him as a former experiment farm manager and a farmer with an interest "in the work of getting settlers in the area". He did not mention that he actually worked for the railroad to recruit settlers

and in the article advocated railroad supervision of settlement.⁷² Snodgrass cautioned against excessive land allotments and recommended 40 acre tracts for the Matanuska Valley and 80 acre tracts for the Tanana Valley in order to foster “more intensive farming,” to reduce road expenses and to act as a deterrent to “land-Grabbing.”⁷³ This caution was perhaps explained in part by his own observations of the homesteading of larger tracts when he first came to the Matanuska Valley in 1916. That year 400 “mostly single men” staked out 320 acre homesteads and less than seven years later, in April 1923, only “72 remained on their homesteads;” although he acknowledged the draft in World War I had played a large role in the exodus of the early homesteaders.⁷⁴

Snodgrass also argued that since Alaska had imported \$5,281,759.00 in agricultural products in 1931 there was an opportunity for what he estimated to be 600 farms in the Matanuska Valley and 400 in the Tanana Valley to provide local sources for much of what was imported.⁷⁵

As soon as colonists started to arrive, Snodgrass became an active booster and cheer leader for the project, as noted in the first local newspaper, the *Matanuska Valley Pioneer*. The newspaper made the following observations about Snodgrass when he attended an early meeting of the newly arrived colonists, “M.D. Snodgrass who has lived many years in the valley followed Col. Hunt with a fine talk on the bright future for a wonderful community the colonists faced. ‘No one will make a fortune,’ he said, ‘But we will live well, and I’d much rather have my home where all have a little, than where a few have it all.’”⁷⁶ The creation of a New Deal colony in Palmer did not deter Snodgrass from attempting to be elected as a Republican to the territorial legislature. Not

surprisingly, his effort failed in 1938. The April, 1938 primary results showed Palmer voters selecting the Democratic ballot by 3 to 1.⁷⁷

In 1938 Alaska's territorial legislature was elected from four divisions of enormous geographical dimensions. The practical result of area wide voting was that the population of Anchorage voters decided the outcome of most races and was in turn the source of nearly all of the winning candidates. In order for a non-Anchorage candidate to win he or she had to win in Anchorage or win by overwhelming margins everywhere else. That rarely happened. Snodgrass's success among Republicans in the New Deal town of Palmer was of little value in the context of the division-wide voting in a year that would be very good for the Democratic party nationally. Also of interest was Anthony J. Dimond's renomination as federal delegate. Snodgrass had served with Dimond as a territorial senator in 1923 and had come to see him as part of the Democratic machinations about which he had complained to delegate Sutherland in 1926. In the 1938 general election Snodgrass' own sense of loss was probably magnified by the re-election of Dimond, with whom he had once served, to the highest elected office in Alaska

Snodgrass never attained the political success that Dimond did, though he sought public office repeatedly. He ran as a candidate for either the house or senate in every election between 1944 and 1958. He was eighty-two years old in his last run for public office. His active political career spanned fifty six years and ten campaigns between his first election in 1922 and his last attempt in 1958. In his last nine campaigns, even when there were more than twenty names on the ballot, Snodgrass was always the high vote

getter in the Palmer precincts (with one exception when Gerrit Snider of Wasilla outpolled him in 1948 by six votes in Palmer). His political career was always hampered by the divisional voting system which meant he needed to compete for votes in more than ninety precincts stretching from Unalaska to Cordova to Talkeetna. The voters of Palmer remained steadfast in their support for his candidacies even when he was an octogenarian and declining in popularity elsewhere. The people who knew him best remained loyal voters to the end, a testament to his well appreciated contributions in the Matanuska Valley.

4.11 Snodgrass, a Bridge between Settlers and Colonists

The early years of the Matanuska Colony were not easy for the new settlers, and a substantial portion of the community became disenchanted with the management and land ownership status of the Colony farms. Snodgrass involved himself publicly in the issues of the day. In 1939, he wrote an extended six page condemnation of the management of the Alaska Rural Rehabilitation Corporation (ARRC) in two back-to-back issues of the local newspaper, the *Valley Settler*. The ARRC managed the colony and had been under a general manager named Don L. Irwin who had been working with “old settlers” (Snodgrass’ term for settlers in the area before the colony) to form a co-op managed by both old and new settlers. A council representing both groups had been created. In the meantime, Ross Sheely replaced Don Irwin as new general manager, and he dismissed the joint council. Snodgrass concluded his scathing criticisms with a demand that colony management be turned over to the co-op, that colonists be given warranty deeds to their land and that colony reserve lands be released for settlement. “When those things are

done, then do we stand a chance of restoring confidence and may hope for peace and prosperity in the Matanuska Valley.”⁷⁸

Agriculture was always at the center of Snodgrass’s political campaigns. His 17 point 1944 “platform” affirmed his long-standing interests in agriculture, settlement incentives, university development and statehood. Two of his platform planks anticipated an influx of servicemen to Alaska after the war. He added notably a plank against racial discrimination.

In 1944, perhaps because he was running as a Republican in a New Deal Colony, Snodgrass paid for a letter to the people of Palmer in the local publication *Valley Settler* urging the voters to look beyond party affiliation. He lost his bid for territorial senate in the 1944 election, but still was the fourth highest vote getter in the Palmer precinct out of twenty eight people running for various offices on the ballot.⁷⁹

Undaunted by the slim chances of his being appointed, given his Republican affiliation, Snodgrass sought a position in the administration of New Deal Democrat Ernest Gruening within four months of his failed bid for the territorial senate. He asked to be considered for the post of Commissioner of Agriculture. He recited his lengthy service in agriculture and politics and settlement recruitment efforts with the railroad. He noted his sponsorship of “progressive legislation” to reimburse owners of cows afflicted with bovine tuberculosis.⁸⁰ He did not get the job, but was undeterred and remained a constant and very public Republican advocate for agriculture in Democratic Palmer.

In 1947 Snodgrass was among several Palmer area individuals who started to advocate the relocation of the territorial capital from Juneau to Palmer, at one point even

offering to donate some of his own property for the relocation.⁸¹ The effort continued for several years, including a 1949 Palmer Chamber of Commerce effort to solicit the legislature to hold a constitutional convention in Palmer.⁸²

In 1938, 1940 and 1942 the Third Division consistently elected only Democrats to all four House seats available with only one interruption in 1940 when Almer Peterson won a seat which he lost again in 1942.⁸³ In 1944 the Third Division population had increased enough to warrant seven seats, and the Republicans started to win. In 1944 two of the seven seats went to Anchorage Republicans Almer Peterson and Oscar Gill who were re-elected in 1946.⁸⁴ In 1948 the Democrats took all seven seats and kept them until 1952.⁸⁵ Snodgrass became a perennial losing Republican candidate in a Democrat district. Winning in the Palmer precinct was never sufficient to make up for Snodgrass's less respectable vote totals elsewhere.

By 1948, he criticized big government as being contrary to Alaskan individualism and apparently found an increasingly receptive audience even in a town largely composed of New Deal Democrats. In an opinion piece critical of what he believed was long distance government meddling in the management of the local Co-op he concluded "A few more years can take all private enterprise away from Alaskans and give us Federal Control in all things Alaskan."⁸⁶

Snodgrass' ability to attract voter support was not solely based on his political opinions. He was a thoroughly civic minded activist. Hardly any major Valley institution existed without some assistance from Snodgrass. For example, in 1948 when he ran for the legislature and criticized the federal management of the Co-op, he also worked hard

on gathering and publishing local agricultural production statistics and writing articles promoting the fair he had helped organize.⁸⁷ In his reminiscences of his long life in Alaska, former territorial legislator and colleague, Gerrit Heinie Snider wrote two pages about Snodgrass's contributions to the development of the Matanuska Valley and summed up his opinion as follows: "Someone has written, "By his works ye shall know him." The names of M.D. and Mrs. Snodgrass are written in golden letters in Alaskan history."⁸⁸

As vice president of the Matanuska Valley Association he submitted detailed instructions via local newspaper articles to would-be fair exhibitors about the process along with a general promotion for fair attendance.⁸⁹ He was also involved in the Valley Hospital Association where he had unsuccessfully run for election to the Board of Directors in 1948.⁹⁰

Snodgrass's persistence in seeking elected office was slowly building momentum. In the April, 1950 primary he was the high vote getter for House in the Palmer precinct and one of two Republicans among the top eight vote getters in the Matanuska Valley.⁹¹ Perhaps ominously for a political figure, Snodgrass' age and energy became newsworthy events on a local level. *The Valley Settler* featured a solo drive by Snodgrass up the Alcan Highway at the age of 74 and particularly wrote that, "We imagine that Mr. Snodgrass is about the oldest man to make the trip over the highway all by himself. ... He wasn't all tired out either, because he was seen around town about his duties, the following day."⁹²

Snodgrass maintained a fairly high profile in the *Matanuska Valley Record* where

he often wrote a column about the history of early Alaska, often focusing on the Matanuska Valley. He also used the column to promote local political causes, including the plan to make Palmer the capital of Alaska. In April of 1951 he wrote, "Most people of Palmer look forward anticipating a day when the stranger alighting from a streamlined 'Aurora' for the first time will be able to look westward and see a beautiful Capitol building on Capitol Hill, and exclaim with admiration, 'So! This is the Capitol of Alaska!'"⁹³

4.12 Ike's Man from Palmer and the Birth of another College

In April 1952, the *Record* ran an extended biography of Snodgrass which described him politically as follows: "A Republican - believes in the traditions of the party, and in its future service to the country. Progressives - for statehood and full development of our National resources - for Alaska first."⁹⁴ The same publication profiled him as a candidate six months later, where he declared "Schooling has been our greatest problem ...I will work for vocational training in our schools of Alaska, and for an Agricultural College at Palmer."⁹⁵

Snodgrass would live to see the founding of what would become the Matanuska-Susitna Campus of the University of Alaska Anchorage in 1958. The campus started off in Palmer as the Matanuska-Susitna Community College. In time, a new larger campus was established adjacent to the Matanuska agricultural experiment station which Snodgrass had established in 1916.

Snodgrass participated in a full page campaign ad in the *Matanuska Valley Record* in October 1952. It listed a full slate of Republican candidates and a platform summary

all under the heading “Vote Republican Oct. 14, 1952 ‘Ike’s Team in Alaska’”.⁹⁶ Voters finally elected Snodgrass to the Territorial House of Representatives as a Republican representing the Matanuska Valley. It had been nearly thirty years since he had served in the legislature as a Senator from Fairbanks. He was 76 years old. He was part of the national Republican resurgence led by President Dwight David Eisenhower. Also elected from Palmer on the same Republican slate was Dr. Lee McKinley, a dentist. The House District for all of southcentral Alaska experienced nearly a Republican sweep, with Wendall Kay the only Democrat elected from the district.⁹⁷ When Snodgrass went to Juneau, none of his colleagues from 1922 remained in office in Juneau. The size of the legislature had doubled, and he must have felt nostalgia for the memories of 1923-24 together with the excitement of again assuming an office he had so long sought.

Consistent with his lifelong interests, he announced that he would go to Juneau and present a bill “for a vocational, agricultural college as a branch of the university to be located in the Matanuska Valley.”⁹⁸ Fellow Republican Heinie Snider recalled one legislative moment above all others that stood out in his mind from Snodgrass’s one term in the House: “I will never forget the fight he put up when he was a member of the House of Representatives and sponsoring the farm loan bill.”⁹⁹ Snodgrass still promoted agriculture in every venue possible in his eighth decade.

Snodgrass also promoted statehood for Alaska and postulated that it would lead to revision of homestead rules which, in turn, would yield more private land ownership and prosperity.¹⁰⁰ Consistent with his lifelong optimism about agriculture in Alaska, he firmly believed that federal land policies had stifled the settlement and accordingly, the

economic development of Alaska.

In 1954, the Alaska Democrats reversed the landslide of 1952 and reclaimed every single House seat from the southcentral district when Democrats replaced all nine Republican incumbents including Snodgrass.¹⁰¹ Once again Snodgrass being the top vote getter in both Palmer precincts was meaningless in the context of the entire Third Division.¹⁰² In 1956 he ran for the House again and was soundly defeated, placing only fourteenth among twenty-one candidates for ten seats.¹⁰³¹ In 1958, he tried to return to the territorial legislature as a senator and was defeated in the primary. He was 82 years old and clearly his age had become an issue.

In his two terms in the legislature Snodgrass had not been particularly effective in passing major legislation. He was, however, respected by the voters in Palmer and his fellow Republicans. Alaska became a state in 1959 and Snodgrass, a supporter of statehood was given one last political moment in the sun by his party after decades of carrying the Republican banner in a Democratic district.

4.13 The First Electoral Vote

Alaska could cast electoral votes for the first time in 1960. Although John F. Kennedy won the election, he lost to Richard M. Nixon in Alaska and therefore, Alaska's Republican electors cast electoral votes for Nixon. Snodgrass was 84 years old but still active in the Republican party. He, along with Charles Jones of Nome and Sylvia Ringstad of Fairbanks, were the Republican electors in 1960. They journeyed to Juneau to cast their votes for Nixon. On December 18, 1960, a banquet was held for the electors and they then cast the first electoral votes for Alaska the next day, on December 19, 1960.

The program for the dinner included a brief biography of all three electors. All three biographies referred to political activities. Only in the case of Snodgrass did the biography devote more attention to his passion for the promotion of agriculture in Alaska than partisan political activities.¹⁰⁴

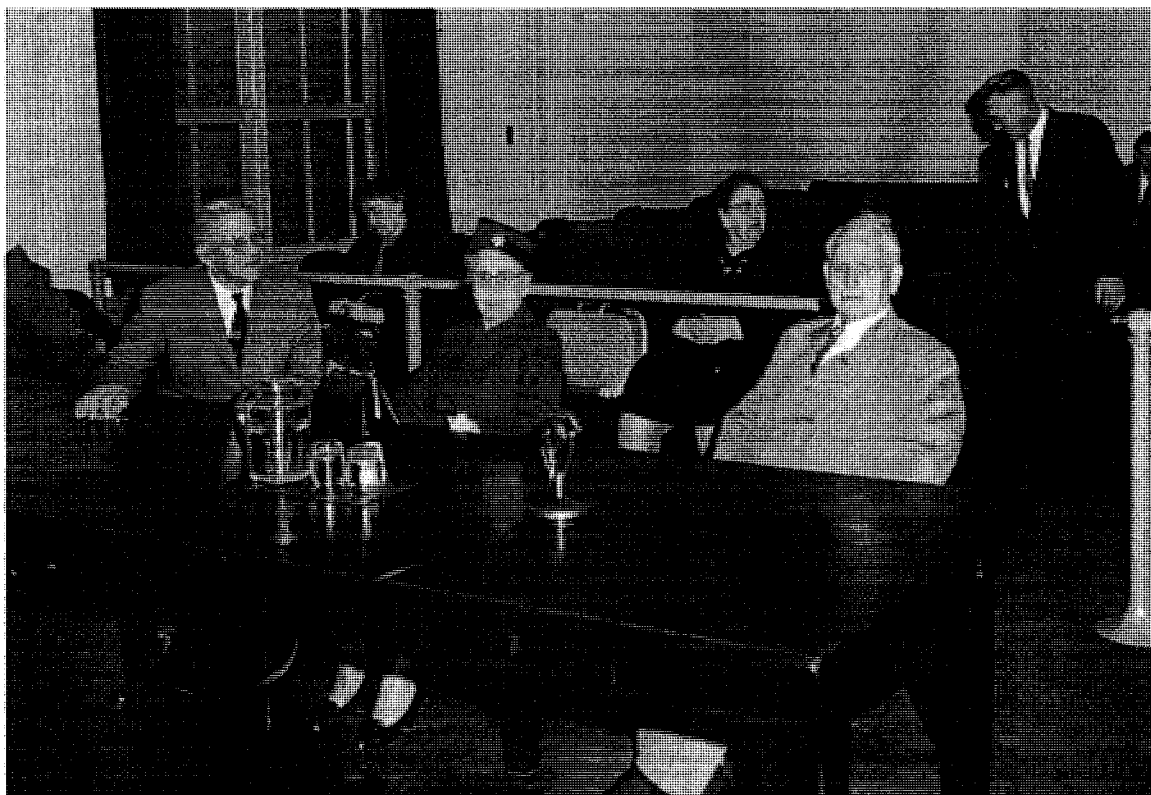


Figure 15: M.D. Snodgrass, seated far left, casting Alaska's first electoral vote for Richard Nixon, December, 1960. Alaska State Library, R.N. DeArmond Collection, PCA 258-v.A, page 17, #1.

Historian Richard Van Alstyne described empires, like the American Empire, as “creatures of natural forces - of emigration and colonization, of commerce and religion, and of the desire to extend political influence.”¹⁰⁵ Perhaps because of its remote location, Alaska was slow to experience the immigration that usually ushered in the colonial, commercial, religious and political phases that occurred so rapidly elsewhere. The delayed federal focus on Alaska did produce unusual political circumstances for the territory’s citizens.

The legacies of Alaska’s hybrid territorial roots included: fewer settlers and minimal private land ownership, substantial Native autonomy (as compared to other indigenous North American peoples), a high level of dependence on the federal government and a highly transient non-Native population. Snodgrass had actively worked for a different legacy. His vision for Alaska would probably have resulted in a state with more private land ownership, less transience and less federal dependence. Yet his own life in Alaska was a reflection of realities he could not overcome. He had been a lifelong federal civil service employee, 31 years with the government experiment stations and the Alaska Railroad. He advocated settlement of Alaska, but ultimately, even the Matanuska Valley colony experiment produced only fleeting results after significant subsidy. Had Snodgrass’s vision of Alaska’s developing on the model of Kansas been realized, the clash between Native and non-Native peoples might very well have been much more volatile. Snodgrass and like-minded advocates of settlement had witnessed the noticeable change in the composition of non-Native settlers coming north after World War II, namely families displaced single men as the predominant social block in Alaska.

In 1945, after an absence of 14 years, former Congressional Delegate Dan Sutherland returned to Alaska for a nostalgic visit. He perceived a change in the composition of the population, "A few of our old friends were there but most of the people were strangers. The country had changed and a new class of citizens, a venturesome class, seeking improvement of its lot in life, had come to the territory. They have little knowledge of the Alaska we knew, nor will they ever know. The old Alaska had passed away. The prospector had departed."¹⁰⁶

The political structure of Alaska had changed. Sutherland's power base of mining camps full of single male prospectors had disappeared by the time Congress granted statehood in 1958.¹⁰⁷ World War II and the efforts of leaders like M.D. Snodgrass had finally started to transform the composition of the non-Native population of Alaska as families of settlers replaced mining camps of single men. Snodgrass would probably have concurred with Sutherland, that the new settlers were also venturesome folk, but motivated by different dreams.

1. Alpheus H. Snow, *The Administration of Dependencies: A Study of the Evolution of the Federal Empire, With Special Reference to American Colonial Problems* (New York: The Knickerbocker Press, 1902), 105.

2. Ibid., 429-430; Jack Erickson Eblen, *The First and Second United States Empires: Governors and Territorial Government, 1784-1912* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1968), 39.

3. Snow, *The Administration of Dependencies: A Study of the Evolution of the Federal Empire, With Special Reference to American Colonial Problems*, 573; Gary Lawson and Guy Seidman, *The Constitution of Empire: Territorial Expansion and American Legal History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 106.

4. Eblen, *The First and Second United States Empires*, 7 & 8.

5. Milton D. Snodgrass to "My Dear People", 1 April, 1952.
6. Jeannette Paddock Nichols, *Alaska: A History of its Administration, Exploitation, and Industrial Development During its First Half Century Under the Rule of the United States* (Cleveland: Arthur H. Clark Company, 1924), 158.
7. Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1996), 3.
8. Claus-M. Naske & Herman E. Slotnick, *Alaska: A History of the 49th State* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994), 86.
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Chapter 5

M.D. Snodgrass and the Creation of the Alaska State Fair

When MD Snodgrass died in 1967 the *Anchorage Times* referred to him as the "grand old man of Alaskan agriculture."¹ A 1964 summation of his life in the same paper more precisely referenced him as the "'grand old man' of the fair" under the headline "Founder of Matanuska Valley Fair Retains Enthusiasm."² Agriculture was his lifelong passion, however, the annual Alaska State Fair³ in Palmer was his most enduring legacy. M.D. Snodgrass was instrumental in the founding and management of the fair that remains the single largest annual gathering of Alaskans each year drawing over 300,000 people. The fair was a natural consequence of his midwestern heritage, the evolution of American fairs, and his untiring advocacy of agricultural opportunities in Alaska.

The frontier of territorial Alaska had provided Snodgrass with opportunities to improve his life and help build a new society from scratch. He was a participant in the creation of federal experiment stations across Alaska, the University of Alaska, the town of Palmer, the Matanuska-Susitna College and the Alaska State Fair. It is not surprising that much of what he helped create strongly resembled the midwestern society he had come from, including the institution of the fair. M.D. Snodgrass claimed that one of his earliest vivid memories was of the Indiana Fair when he was four years old.

In 1956, during an interview with the *Anchorage Times*, Snodgrass reminisced about his lifelong interest. He recalled that he saw his "first fair when I was four years old in Reneseller, Ind. There was horse racing and sulky racing, saddle races and a balloon ascension ... I'll never forget."⁴

Snodgrass, like many others, cherished precious memories from happy moments in his youth. He invested a tremendous amount of personal energy in recapturing the nostalgia of his own boyhood while enabling others to experience the same things. To this day, in his home state of Indiana, the town of Connor Prairie continues to sponsor an annual May Balloon Classic in conjunction with the Indianapolis 500 Festival where thirty-three hot air balloons (representing 33 race car drivers) are launched and then chase each other in a “hound and hare race.”⁵

That Indiana boyhood was part of his cultural identity when he came to Alaska in 1907. His life embraced many pivotal moments in Alaska history, including the founding of the Matanuska Valley Agricultural and Industrial Fair (now the Alaska State Fair) in 1936. Snodgrass had several motives for the creation of the fair. While his efforts were ambitious, commendable, and enduring, they were not so much original as traditional. His visions for the fair went beyond mere entertainment and giant cabbages; his vision was drawn from a rich global heritage and desire for the perpetuation of the cultural events we call “fairs.”

5.1 The Historical Roots of Fairs

Historically, fairs and later expositions were usually developed for one (or more) of at least nine major reasons: to promote trade, to advance commercial development, to serve a religious purpose, to entertain, to promote agriculture, to showcase new technology, to promote nationalistic goals, to educate (or more cynically indoctrinate) the public, and/or to promote community beautification. When M.D. Snodgrass organized the Matanuska Agricultural and Industrial Fair Association, Inc. in Palmer in 1936, he

was building an institution influenced and shaped by many of the factors enumerated above. In founding what would eventually be named the Alaska State Fair, Inc., M.D. Snodgrass pursued both a personal vision of an agrarian Alaska and perpetuation of a centuries old cultural tradition.

The roots of the Alaska State Fair can be traced from antiquity through nine stages of evolution: First, the nine factors enumerated above as the origins of fairs were broad and durable. Then fairs rapidly acquired an entertainment feature that persisted to the present. Modern fairs and society were then greatly altered by the mid-nineteenth century advent of the "international expositions." At the same time that "western" expositions and fairs evolved, Alaska, in its early "contact" period with the Russian Empire, also developed a unique blending of Native "potlatch"/religious festivals combined with Siberian "trade" fairs. "Western" traditional notions of fairs made their first and most enduring impact in the brief history of the "reindeer fairs" of western Alaska. The American fascination with "international expositions" in the late 1800s and early 1900s embraced and inspired early Alaskan non-Native pioneers. Those same pioneers had, for the most part, migrated to Alaska from states and territories with well established traditions of state and county fairs. Within two decades of the Klondike Gold Rush of 1898, substantial numbers of American settlers in Alaska, like M.D. Snodgrass, brought with them a desire to continue familiar traditions like fairs and demonstrate sufficient progress that would justify a fair. In that context, the future Alaska State Fair was established through the efforts of M.D. Snodgrass and other members of Grange No. 1 in Palmer in 1936, reflecting the many contributory features of fairs and expositions

elsewhere in centuries past.

By 1936, the association of fairs with “entertainment” was well established. In the words of fair historian Wayne Caldwell Neely, modern fairs have “degenerated into amusement centers.”⁶ Historian Cornelius Walford acknowledges that by 1723, when Daniel DeFoe described the Sturbridge Fair in England (which began as a religious festival), the description made no reference to religion, focused on trade, and concluded with brief references to food and entertainment.⁷ In other words, a fair that began as a religious event had lost its devotional aspects and evolved into a commercial enterprise. In late nineteenth century America that served as the formative period of Snodgrass's life, the fairs of midwestern America had also come to be associated closely with the scientific revolution in agricultural science.

5.2 American Fairs and Expositions

In the United States, fairs evolved into opportunities for farmers to improve agriculture and then more recently, places of entertainment. Journalist Monica Davey argued that the “original purpose” of American state fairs was “to teach about farming and industry, and stir a sense of community.”⁸

Expositions, often associated with fairs, can have similar components. More commonly expositions were associated with nationalistic motives to demonstrate technical and cultural achievements. Furthermore, expositions were one time events meant to attract international exhibitors for a national audience. Fairs are annual events directed at regional markets. In one of the most comprehensive attempts to understand expositions in the context of American cultural evolution, historian Neil Harris assessed

the great expositions of the early twentieth century as, "The one exception in this mass of competing and differentiating institutions ("spheres within city populations, rarely touching except in moments of crisis"), the one enterprise which did manage to bring the people of the cities together, and mingle them with strangers and visitors . . . many were striving for was some visible unity to the social, economic, and artistic lives of their divided communities."⁹

Expositions (and to a lesser degree fairs) in the United States have also been used to educate or from a more cynical perspective, indoctrinate the general population. Expositions and fairs, in American popular opinion, however, also came to represent "entertainment," often to the chagrin of their organizers. Anthropologist and fair historian Burton Benedict claimed that "amusement zones" were a relatively recent component of fairs, "The earliest fairs did not have amusement zones, though sometimes entrepreneurs set up their stalls on the periphery. The Paris exposition of 1867 seems to have been the first with an amusement zone. It was located outside the main fair and featured a double decker captive balloon ride, excursion boats on the Seine, theatres and a multitude of national restaurants."¹⁰

Organizers of the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893 in Chicago reluctantly recognized the inevitable popular association of even the grandest of international expositions with spectacle and "fun" when they created a "place" and set aside a physical location "known as the Midway Plaisance." Fair organizers reserved this place for exhibits that were too commercial, or too similar to circus or carnival attractions, for inclusion in the edifying White City of Chicago.¹¹

Snodgrass seemed to recognize the synergistic benefits of a public fair. While his earliest memories of a fair in Indiana dwell on what appeared to be the entertainment features like ballons and horse races, there was also the notion that fairs were a window into a larger world. In the late 1880s and through the early 1920s in Alaska, travel was an expensive luxury for most people. Long before the emergence of a comfortable middle class with discretionary income and time, interstate highways and cheap air travel, the world was out of reach for most Americans. M.D. Snodgrass saw fairs as a vehicle to bring the world to rural Americans and allow them to have a good time.

Through his years of work with Kansas State University and the use of county fairs to showcase new technology and improve the lives of farmers, Snodgrass had learned the value of fairs as tools of education. It was not traditional education; indeed, historian Reid Badger portrayed the Chicago World's Fair midway as a reluctant concession by a management that had "given up - under financial pressure - all expectations of a 'dignified and decorous' ethnological display under the control of Professor Putnam" (George Palmer Putnam).¹² Badger went on to note that the reluctant allowance for a "midway" may have been the financial salvation of the entire enterprise and concluded, "the unrestrained carnival atmosphere of the Midway Plaisance provided a much needed escape from the harsh realities of daily living, or perhaps, it provided a patently unselfconscious, eclectic, and noisy relief from the idealism of progress and unity so pervasive elsewhere on the fairgrounds."¹³

In what was perhaps his most interesting book, namely the *World of Fairs: The Century of Progress Expositions*, historian Robert W. Rydell concluded that the midway

represented a fundamental cultural-values shift in America, "The 1893 Chicago's World's Columbian Exposition represented a contest between the White City and Midway Plaisance for dominance in American culture, the American Pavilion at the 1958 Brussels fair reflected the triumph of the Midway as an organizing principle to American life. . . . that equated better living with more entertainment and leisure."¹⁴

Midways continue to be a standard, if not primary feature, of state and county fairs throughout America. The Alaska State Fair, Inc. in Palmer was no exception. To this day, it is the midway carnival food and games and rides that draw the crowds, who then wander off into the secondary educational and competitive display venues at the Alaska State Fair. Snodgrass was not troubled by the evolution of the fair's purpose. From the very first pages of the first fair "guide" in 1936, he declared that "the purpose of the Fair is entertaining as well as instructing" when he enumerated the attractions.¹⁵

Benedict's orthodox observation that world's fairs were a source of ideas from *the middle class* stands in stark contrast to the conclusions of anthropologist Robert Rydell who asserted that the motivation for the establishment of the fair was a subtle method of exerting control over the middle class on the part of the more powerful organizers. Rather than being a source of ideas, Rydell perceived fairs as a method for the social elite of America to diffuse broad ideological values into the unwary lower classes and as a means to a degree of social control. Regardless, Snodgrass represented an example of both arguments. Financially, he never attained anything more than middle class status. Politically, he was off and on, a member of the social elite of territorial Alaska. By 1936, when Snodgrass founded the fair in Palmer his network of social connections was

territory-wide: he corresponded with legislators as former colleagues, he had worked with federal personnel on the railroad and nearly every experiment station in Alaska, he had served with Fairbanks college regents and territory board of education members for nearly a decade, Anchorage and Fairbanks business leaders had worked with him on agriculture and fair projects. His intentions in creating a fair certainly were to influence the thinking of Alaska's middle class. Yet, he was more a part of that middle class than of a distant elite.

5.3 Circuses and Museums in the American Fair Experience

The involvement of P.T. Barnum in the 1853 New York Fair and the subsequent inter-relationships among Barnum, Bailey & Ringling Brothers, William Cody's "Wild West Show," the Chicago 1893 World's Fair and the Paris Exposition highlighted the role of circuses and popular entertainment in the history of fairs. This blending of concepts in popular entertainment with notions of education and sophisticated museum-like qualities led to spirited disagreement about exposition content among organizers of the 1893 Chicago World's Fair. Historian Louis Warren categorized a circus as a "morally questionable enterprise" and "indisputably a European cultural form" that nineteenth century Americans considered "immoral and decadent".¹⁶ Historian Neil Harris, in his book *Cultural Excursions*, surveyed the American history of linkage among museums, fairs, expositions, "the drama of consumer desire" and the "culture of reassurance." In the search for the proper balance between entertainment and the other goals of fairs, there never was a fixed formula for content that satisfied all parties. The search continually evolved. In 1959, M.D. Snodgrass spent part of his time as the

advertising manager of the fair promoting its "fast draw contest" for children. The Alaska State Fair Board had decided to embrace a national program for children to determine which young boy was the fastest cap pistol draw in the country.¹⁷ What seemed like a great idea in 1959 would undoubtedly be controversial today.

Certainly, the large expositions deliberately emphasized the serious long-term goals of their endeavors over the "fun" aspects of the expositions. On the cover page of historian Hubert H. Bancroft's five-hundred page catalogue of the components of the 1893 Chicago World's Fair, a subtitle provided perhaps one of the better definitions of the many international expositions that followed the 1851 London Exposition, namely "Designed to set forth the Display made by the Congress of Nations, of Human Achievement in Material Form, so as the more Effectually to Illustrate the Progress of Mankind in all the Departments of Civilized Life".¹⁸ In other words, expositions could be *just about anything and everything to everyone*.

Ancient trade fairs had not followed a single path of evolution into world expositions. Modern American county and state fairs had their origins in ancient trade fairs, religious festivals, and expositions. Certainly the typical modern American county fair remained a place of popular entertainment and recreation combined with educational and commercial opportunities and a seemingly futile effort to sustain interest in American agricultural activities. In 1951, Snodgrass concluded a newspaper history of the fair with a reiteration of his core vision of the fair's purpose: "The fair belongs to the people of Alaska and gives to every person in Alaska the opportunity to show what Alaska has to offer the agricultural world."¹⁹ As agriculture slowly diminished in the Matanuska

Valley, the Alaska State Fair has also evolved into something different than what M.D. Snodgrass had originally envisioned.

5.4 Early Alaskan Fairs

When M.D. Snodgrass first arrived, there were no non-Native fairs in Alaska. He came to be associated with the early Tanana Valley Fair, but along with local farmers, the "official founder" of the Tanana Valley Fair in 1924 was George Gasser of the local experiment station.²⁰ It is also apparent from Fairbanks experimental farm records that Snodgrass and others had been involved in a Fairbanks "agricultural fair" as early as 1915.²¹ There were, however, pre-contact Native "fairs" in Alaska which shared many of the characteristics of ancient European "fairs".

Not unlike their old-world counterparts, the earliest Native Alaskan "fairs" might more accurately be described as social occasions. In 1899, Smithsonian explorer and scientist Edward William Nelson listed six major festivals for the Yukon and Kuskokwim peoples.²² Anthropologist Ernest S. Burch commented on the emergence of early Native trade fairs in Northwest Alaska.²³ M.D. Snodgrass, however, did not demonstrate an awareness of or interest in Native Alaskan fairs.

Yet it is clear from the first exhibitor's guide to the Matanuska Valley Fair that Snodgrass intended the fair to encompass all of western Alaska and its peoples, rather than just the Matanuska Valley. The guide specifically encouraged exhibits of Native crafts and furs as well as extending invitations for exhibitors from across the territory.²⁴ While his tenure in the Alaska territorial senate in the early 1920s offered some evidence that he was progressive in his views of Native Alaskans, Snodgrass did not focus on

Natives or their contributions to Alaska. He lived in Alaska during a time when even progressives on racial issues might be perceived as insensitive today.

The era of the great American expositions climaxed in the years immediately following Snodgrass' arrival in Alaska. Two years later, in 1909, the Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition in Seattle was a prominent event that featured Alaska. Such events certainly influenced Snodgrass and there are many hints that he drew from those experiences when he initiated what would become the Alaska State Fair in Palmer. In the context of the history of fairs, one of the questions that arises in the life of Snodgrass and the story the Alaska State Fair relates to his motives. Was he a part of the social elite in Alaska trying to create an institution to control and direct people? Was he an unwitting victim of national exposition propaganda when he established the fair? Or was he a civic-minded pioneer attempting to create a familiar institution for Alaska's emerging settler society? There is room for several interpretations of what motivated Snodgrass to found the Alaska State Fair.

The unsettled frontier of Alaska permitted a pioneer like Snodgrass to attain social status that he had not previously enjoyed in his Kansas years. Snodgrass did not leave any record that would suggest he had contemplated the comparatively fewer opportunities in Kansas before he came to Alaska. In fact, his whole life in Alaska seemed to be dedicated to re-creating (perhaps consciously) in Alaska the very same cultural and social structure that had arguably limited his options in Kansas. Snodgrass was a family man, a farmer, a government employee, a patriot, a Presbyterian and a Republican. In other words, he was a conservative and traditionalist by most measures. That he would become

closely affiliated with a small family farming town and the creation of a classic country fair was not counter-intuitive.

Snodgrass would have agreed with President William McKinley's assessment of expositions and fairs in a speech given the day before he was assassinated at the Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo, New York. There, the President had remarked that "as 'time-keepers of progress' ... they [fairs] record the world's advancement. They stimulate the energy, enterprise, and intellect of the people and quicken human genius. They go into the home. They broaden and brighten the daily life of the people."²⁵

5.5 Early Alaska Cultural Influences on the First Palmer Fair

It is hard to overlook the intense passion Snodgrass had for his vision of the fair, in the single spaced, twelve pages of the first fair exhibitor and visitor guide to the 1936 fair. The scope of his dream of a fair in the Matanuska Valley was clearly not limited to the people of Palmer. The breadth of the interests he had for the fair are summarized in the headings he developed: Admissions, Season Tickets, Entertainment Features, Agricultural Fair Exhibits, Home economics, Mines and Minerals, Furs, Indian Crafts, Art, Educational.²⁶ The divisions provided for multiple essay and science contests with serious themes and cash prizes. The judging and oversight needed to award prizes to so many endeavors meant that future fairs might have larger exhibitor guides but ultimately fewer time-intensive educational features. Snodgrass wanted the fair to be educational, fun and interactive. The primary focus of the fair was to promote agriculture.

Nevertheless, as the twentieth century progressed, with the development of amusement parks and full service entertainment destinations like Las Vegas, the role or

purpose of a county or state fair was less discernable. Journalist Michael Judge, using Philip Stong's book *State Fair* as inspiration, argued there was still an agricultural purpose for state fairs, even in 2006; the real value of the state fair, [is that it is] a place where parents and children can come to compete, meet other families, and reap the rewards of years of hard work. Beyond the amusement park rides, the fun foods and silly contests, the big-name music stars and state-of-the-art farm equipment, lie a way of life and a work ethic that is handed down from generation to generation, a respect for the land and the animals and crops raised on it.²⁷

The Alaska State Fair, like its counterparts across America, was founded to advance farming but slowly the farming component shrank into educational window to connect fairgoers with their increasingly distant agricultural heritage. Snodgrass understood the power of a well organized fair and the need for competitive entertainment as well as educational features. He knew from his own youth that thorough pre-planning for a fair could leave a legacy of rich inspiration. Historian Dennis Downey captured the enthusiasm that others, possibly including Snodgrass, had for these events: "It is the greatest thing that ever came into my life," William Dean Howells told a reporter of the Chicago world's fair. 'It gives verity and value to everything There never was and may never be again anything so beautiful.' Despite the incongruities, contrasts, and controversies that informed this season of renewal, few visitors dissented from Howell's remembrance of that summer by the lake."²⁸

5.6 Snodgrass's Vision for the Palmer Fair

One undeniable legacy of the 1893 Chicago Exposition was the prolonged

national fascination with such events. Historian Frederick Jackson Turner, whose own fame was secured by his speech at the Chicago World's Fair on his American Frontier thesis, later expanded on the same topic in a book. He wrote that American mid-western world fairs, in which he included Buffalo, Chicago, Omaha and St. Louis, were "important popular educational influences," especially helpful in contributing to what he described as the "vigor and mental activity of the common people" in the quest to preserve the "high ideals of the pioneers" from the "inundation of material success."²⁹ While the people he described probably did not appreciate his academic perspective, Turner saw that expositions were cropping up because the public looked to them for rejuvenation and inspiration.

These twin themes were not inconsistent with M.D. Snodgrass's own summation of the purpose of the first Matanuska Valley Fair in 1936. "The purpose of the Fair is entertaining as well as instructing. It is our Harvest Festival," he wrote. Snodgrass's prodigious effort in detailing the events and goals for the first fair offers insight into his personal investment in the project and the deliberate recreation of the American Midwest in the Matanuska Valley.³⁰

Historian Henry Adams, in his classic autobiography offered an insightful observation about expositions and fairs in the form of a question that occurred to him while observing the 1893 Chicago World's Fair and the 1900 Paris Great Exposition: "Chicago asked in 1893 for the first time the question whether the American people knew where they were driving. Adams answered, that he did not know, but would try to find out."³¹

Snodgrass, had no such questions, and his concept of a fair was clearly conceived as an entrenchment of an agrarian society in rural Alaska. He understood the synergistic value of combining popular entertainment with advancement of farming in Alaska. In that sense, he seemed to confirm Rydell's premise that there was an orchestrated effort by a leader to mold public opinion under the guise of general education and entertainment. Snodgrass compacted the history of the first fifteen years of the fair into two sentences, "We have been trying to make the fair educational, agricultural, and industrial. A Fair that will show progress and development of our natural resources."³² That theme was not inconsistent with Adams' assessment of the Chicago Exposition when he suggested that "Chicago was the first assertion of American thought as a unity." He asserted even more grandly, "In 1893 . . . the majority at last declared itself, once and for all, in favor of the capitalistic system with all its necessary machinery."³³ In that regard, there can be little doubt that M.D. Snodgrass, despite his own setbacks with free enterprise and private farming, was loyal to capitalism. The core of the first exhibitors guide, which he personally compiled, called for a competitive exhibition of personal enterprise and effort with cash rewards.

While sophisticated analysis of American world's fairs might spark debate about the purpose of such events, Snodgrass's summation of the fair as "our Harvest Festival" was a candid assessment of the fair as a happy celebration of local life and culture. As the culture of Alaska and the Matanuska Valley evolved, so did the fair. Today, with urban sprawl and cheap imported food, agriculture, which dominated Snodgrass's life, is vanishing from the Matanuska Valley. The fair, continues, though with less emphasis on

farming and more on entertainment and current commercial realities.

5.7 The Cultural Setting for the First Palmer Fair

In stark contrast to Henry Adams, who saw implicit messages in the Chicago Fair, historian Reid Badger concluded the opposite. In a chapter, "A Confusion of Symbols" he declares: "All of the great world's fairs, of course, exhibited a degree of diversity and even inconsistency, but in none before or since 1893 was the 'stark, staring' confusion of cultural signs so evident."³⁴ The same argument could be made of most fairs, including the Alaska State Fair, where fair boards emphasize the diversity of exhibits and events in order to appeal to as broad an attendance base as possible without giving much thought to uniformity of message beyond the annual official "theme" which changed far more frequently than the vendors at the fair. The board of directors for the Alaska State Fair has traditionally been more attentive to attraction variety that will generate attendance growth rather than adhering to a long term mission statement for the fair.

Before Snodgrass came to Alaska, the territory had already become a standard component of world's fairs across the country. While anthropologist Robert Rydell portrayed the organization of ethnic displays at the events in a consistently negative light and indeed it was often coercion that got the people into the exhibits and kept them; there is some evidence of a more positive approach to at least Alaska's participation. For example, Bancroft includes several vignettes of Alaska-related displays in the 1893 Chicago Exposition including a life-sized Tlingit coastal village and a display of Aleut and Eskimo fishing technology in comparison to international fishing techniques, ancient and modern.³⁵ The photos and descriptions are more educational than disparaging.

John G. Brady, Alaska's territorial governor from 1897-1906, perceived the expositions as an opportunity to preserve pieces of a disappearing culture as well as advance the economic and political future of Alaska:

The ("Louisiana Purchase Exposition of 1904" in) Saint Louis permitted him to extol Alaska in a grandiose fashion. . . . Alaskan participation in U.S. expositions had grown in quantity and diversity since the 1876 Centennial Fair in Philadelphia. ... As for the territory's outstanding accomplishment, he believed that the handcrafted wood artistry of the Northwest Coast Indians surely matched Alaska's machine-wrought gold. And like native enthusiasts Emmons and Jackson, Brady grieved at the accelerating disappearance of this priceless heritage. . . . Luckily there still existed a few Indian house posts, wooden screens, and especially examples of the natives' world-famous totem poles.³⁶

According to historian Ted C. Hinckley, Brady used the St. Louis Fair as an opportunity to preserve artifacts, including totem poles, for display in St. Louis and then for later return them to Alaska. Hinckley makes it clear that Brady's advocacy for Alaska Natives and their culture was a minority perspective in Alaska, but it also exemplified how American leadership was often divided in its aspirations for educational components of expositions and fairs. Brady saw the 1904 St. Louis world's fair, not as an opportunity to demonstrate Native inferiority, but as a chance to preserve valuable cultures, as well as to advance commercial development interests in Alaska. In fact, by 1904 education was increasingly perceived as the main purpose of world's fairs. The August 1904 *The Literary Digest* noted the growing consensus among educators on the educational role of fairs in America:

Education is the key-note of the Universal Exposition of 1904," said the Director of Exhibits at the opening of the St. Louis Fair. . . . President William F. Slocum, of Colorado College, pays a remarkable tribute (in the New York *Outlook*, August 6) to the World's Fair as an educative force,

declaring that the Exposition is in all essential points “as perfect an illustration as has been seen of the method of the ‘University of the Future,’ which is to exchange pictures and living objects for text-books . . . the entire readjustment of primary education in France was largely the outgrowth of the educational exhibit at Paris in 1878. . . .”³⁷

The Alaska exhibit at the St. Louis fair featured a \$14,933 replica of the White House flanked by over a dozen large totem poles and a Tlingit community house. Inside the main building were collections of Russian artifacts, southeastern Alaska Native art, and mineral displays featuring gold nuggets.³⁸ Visitors left with the impression that Alaska was an exotic land of immense opportunity for the exploitation of natural wealth.

In 1909, Alaska itself was a focus of the Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition (AYPE) in Seattle. Although it was organized primarily by Seattle businessmen, southeast Alaska businessmen initially insisted that the AYPE be held in Alaska. Some even suggested boycotting the event until the AYPE leadership, especially J.E. Chilberg, its president, convinced them that travel to Alaska by a sufficient number of fairgoers would be unlikely.³⁹ To many, the AYPE the Portland Lewis and Clark Centennial, and American Pacific Exposition and Oriental Fair of 1905 were windows into a vision of the future in which American prosperity and power were not to be limited to the West Coast of the continental United States. According to Charles Fairbanks, Vice-President of the United States, who opened the fair, “The future has much in store for you. Yonder is Hawaii, acquired for strategic purposes and demanded in the interest of expanding commerce. Lying in the waters of the Orient are the Philippines which fell to us by the inexorable logic of a humane and righteous war. We must not underrate the commercial opportunities which invite us to the Orient”.⁴⁰

Anthropologist Robert Rydell noted that railroad pioneer James J. Hill, in a speech along the same line at the opening of the AYPE four years later in Seattle, struck a similar theme; namely that: "This exposition . . . may be regarded as the laying of the last rail, the driving of the last spike, in unity of mind and purposes between the Pacific coast and the country east of the mountains," That unity centered on "a vision of Oriental trade."⁴¹

The AYPE was perhaps too successful in linking the future of Alaska to the Orient. For many Alaskans, one of the great disappointments of the AYPE was the much anticipated speech of President William Howard Taft at the fair in October 1909. According to Nichols, "[with] the great man's speech in the exposition's outdoor theatre, there came a bitter disappointment for Alaskans - the President said that he was opposed to territorial government. . . . He would bring the territory under the management of one bureau . . . Taft further observed that this was practically the government which was given to the Philippine Islands . . . Alaskans and even Seattle people strongly resented the classification of the population of the territory with the Philippines, as unfit for self-determination."⁴²

The speech and the reaction to it were further examples of differing opinions about the Expo among social leaders. The economic and political leadership of Alaska and the Pacific Northwest favored territorial government for Alaska, and saw the Fair as an opportunity to persuade the president, as well as the general public, of their point of view. The President and the political leaders of the Pacific Northwest did not read from the same script before the viewing public. The "ruling class", both businessmen and

President alike shared racial stereotypes. Attendees were dismayed, however, when the President recommended that Alaska should be served by the same form of government as the Philippines. It is important to note that before the advent of radio and television, public oratory was popular and fairs were an ideal venue for generating public interest. Historian Karal Ann Marling devoted an entire chapter in her book *Blue Ribbon* to the history of fair “Orating and Speechifying,” which outlined the rise and fall of fairs as venues for great speakers.⁴³ President Taft's speech was a prime example of the importance of fairs for mass communication. The informal nature of the venue allowed speakers to deliver lengthy addresses to patient audiences who, Marling noted, would stand and listen to speakers for hours at a time.

The Alaska State Fair joined the tradition of fairs as American political forums when then U.S. Senator John F. Kennedy spoke at the 1960 event during his presidential campaign.⁴⁴ Snodgrass, a life-long Republican, must have had mixed feelings about Kennedy's use of his beloved fair to support his presidential ambitions. Ironically, Snodgrass later was one of the first three electors for Alaska in its first presidential election after statehood, and he would vote for Richard Nixon.⁴⁵

Regardless of the disappointments associated with it, the AYPE was apparently successful in attracting Alaskans. Nichols reported Alaska politician James Wickersham's unsupported assertion that 20-25 percent of Alaska's white population was absent from Alaska at one time or another to attend the AYPE.⁴⁶ Alaska historian Elizabeth A. Tower provided further details about the Alaska perspective on the AYPE. They confirm that the business and political elite of Alaska and even Seattle were at odds

with the elite of Washington D.C. about the appropriate agenda of the AYPE. Tower described Alaska's efforts to use the AYPE to promote both economic development and political self-rule. Like Nichols, she described Alaska's disappointment with the pronouncements of President William H. Taft, which linked Alaskans to Philippine colonial wards and the determination of at least the Alaska elite to resist the presidential proposal.⁴⁷

Six years later, there was another major exposition in San Francisco. Benedict linked part of the inspiration for the development of the Panama Pacific Exposition of 1915 in San Francisco to the Klondike gold rush and other similar contemporary economic events which had propelled San Francisco to prosperity. He also noted that “the fair was pervaded with images of Manifest Destiny, Social Darwinism, racism and conquest.”⁴⁸

5.8 The American Fair Tradition

The linkage between the great world's fairs and state and county fairs is actually more linguistic than substantial. Historian Reid Badger says that “great fairs could only occur in great cities where the necessary facilities, accommodations, talents, and funds were concentrated.”⁴⁹ World's fairs were international affairs where various nations provided pavilions to display the accomplishments of their people. County and state fairs are brief (a few days to a couple weeks) annual events, whereas world's fairs are normally one time events that can last up to a year. American county and state fairs became an integral feature of stereotypes of American rural life. The exact locale of the earliest American fair is undetermined. Davey claimed that American fairs began in 1807 when

“a New England farmer, Elkanah Watson, . . . put a small exhibition of sheep under an old elm in Pittsfield, Mass.”⁵⁰ There may be competing stories about other fairs but nearly all references describe Watson’s New England fair as the first American fair albeit with less than absolute terminology.

Agriculture and the promotion of agricultural science were the inspirational forces behind the formation of most early American state and county fairs. The genesis of the North Carolina State Fair was a fairly typical example of an American fair. Concerned about primitive farming practices, John F. Tompkins, editor of the *Farmer’s Journal*, created the North Carolina Agricultural Society in 1852 for the express purpose of sponsoring the first North Carolina State Fair in 1853.⁵¹ Like most early American fairs, North Carolina’s initially attempted to present itself as a venue for the promotion of both agriculture and industry. While the promotion of “industry” was a popular notion, the implementation of anything tangible in that regard proved illusory. According to McLaurin:

In 1920 the Agricultural Society formally abandoned the notion that its awards could influence industrial development. Noting the ‘impracticality of establishing a system of judging automobiles, machinery, mechanical and manufactured exhibits on their merits,’ the fair’s management officially adopted a policy of providing display space for retailers of industrial products for a ‘nominal rent.’ . . . When the state Department of Agriculture assumed control of the state fair in 1928, it quickly made clear that its primary goal for the fair was agricultural promotion and that it had no interest in promoting the development of specific industries.⁵²

The Alaska State Fair developed attributes which make it clearly a member of the fraternity of American fairs. *The American State Fair*, by Derek Nelson is a non-scholarly collection of photos and vignettes of activities from American state fairs over

the last one hundred fifty years. It is not meant to be anything more than trivia and entertainment. Yet the book shows that American fairs may be varied and unique in their stories yet they are all, from a distance, quite uniform. Children and adults competing in an endless array of contests are all learning to strive for excellence, success and learning about defeat and recovery. Winning or not winning the blue ribbon at a fair is a step into the culture of capitalism and competition. Snodgrass understood, and fundamentally embraced, the notion that it was a positive social goal for a fair to nurture the competitive spirits of Alaskans. His enthusiasm for contests, events and exhibits created a judging burden for fair organizers that meant the fair would become dependent on the willingness of volunteers to spend countless hours in time-intensive preparation and judging activities. To this day the Alaska State Fair depends on the efforts of over four hundred unpaid volunteers in addition to the paid year-round staff and the for-profit vendors and entertainers. Nelson's photo book also show among other events: pig, car and horse racing, airplane and balloon races and depict the American fascination with blending technology with competition and entertainment.

Alaska's fairs differed little in substance from those in Kansas or elsewhere across America. Geographic isolation has limited the uniformity of vendors found in most states; so carmel apples and cotton candy are supplemented by Prince William Sound oysters and booths featuring fossilized mammoth tusks. There is no apparent linkage to historical Alaska's Native festivals and the Alaska State Fair other than an occasional Native dance troupe.

Photo collections from fairs in the contiguous states also show the passing of eras

when the freak shows and semi-erotic peep shows, once a standard of fair midways, were no longer as socially acceptable. Rydell has detailed the historical linkage between modern American world's fairs and striptease shows, namely, "As if to liberate these fantasies from their Victorian moorings, exposition promoters gave increasing prominence to female striptease performances on exposition midways that, by the end of the decade (1920s), gave way to fully nude female performers in shows replete with world-of-tomorrow themes."⁵³

Rydell noted that the gate receipts for the 1939 New York World's Fair where the striptease took place increased because of the nude performances. This phenomenon, however, was not limited to world's fairs. For example, in North Carolina, McLaurin documented a similar trend at the state fair where, "without question, from 1948 until the early 1970's, the girl shows ruled the States midway. ... it was the strippers the male audience came to see".⁵⁴ The Alaska State Fair was not immune to this "tradition" for as late as 2000 the Colony Stage Venue featured "The LOOK Fashion Show" where foundation lingerie was modeled for thirty minutes for audiences on the same stage where "Arctic Country Dancers" had just performed.⁵⁵ While not a striptease per se, the show was probably not what M.D. Snodgrass had envisioned for the fair.

Nelson's photo book also confirms that across America in the late 1800s, fairs were a well established tradition, and regardless of which state or territory an early Alaskan pioneer might have come from, a fair would have been a common experience. By creating a fair in Palmer, Snodgrass was able to recapture a memory of home for early New Deal colonists so far removed from their mid-western homes. Most or all had had

some exposure to a fair before coming to Alaska and the occasion probably produced favorable memories. Starting a fair in their new home was just as natural as building a church: it was a part of Snodgrass's and the colonists' common cultural heritage.

The interaction between American fair and exposition organizers and patrons yielded an undeniable synergy. The Alaska State Fair, Inc. was first created as a corporation with organizers issuing stock certificates for shares in the "Matanuska Valley Agricultural and *Industrial* Fair Association, Inc."⁵⁶ As Badger noted in his introduction, the great world's fairs "showcased industrial and mechanical inventions and developments", but the Matanauska Valley Fair could not make such claims. M.D. Snodgrass and other organizers, however had had enough exposure to world's-fairs' emphasis on technology to envision similar possibilities for the new fair in 1930s rural Alaska.⁵⁷

5.9 The Founding of the Fair in Palmer

The Western Alaska Fair Assn., Inc. sponsored its first fair in Anchorage from August 30 through September 3, 1924. The fair was organized through the joint effort of the Anchorage Chamber of Commerce and the Anchorage Women's club.⁵⁸ The 1924 statement of the fair announced that its purpose was, "demonstrating the varied range of farm products which are being successfully propagated in the Territory, and to bring the residents of the district into closer touch with the vast industrial possibilities lying along and adjacent to the Alaska Railroad and in those portions of Southwestern and Western Alaska accessible by transportation and which have felt the first touch of commercial enterprise. Thus the fair will prove a double purpose - instructive and entertaining."⁵⁹

The Western Alaska Fair, Assn. Inc. made use of legislation sponsored by Fairbanks Territorial Senator M.D. Snodgrass in 1923 that provided for a \$1,000 grant to promote fairs. The same legislation was also used in 1924 by the newly formed Tanana Valley Fair in Fairbanks. In 1986, the General Manager of the Alaska State Fair, John Hale, wrote that Snodgrass actually helped organize the fair in Anchorage.⁶⁰ In 1955 the *Anchorage Daily Times* printed a biographical story about Snodgrass which also noted that he had worked with Z.J. Loussac, a local pioneer businessman, to raise funds for the Anchorage fair.⁶¹ These subsequent credits appear to exaggerate Snodgrass's role in the Anchorage fair. He was never listed as an officer during any of the years the fair was in existence. He was involved because he was listed as a "regional representative from "Matanuska," as there was no Palmer in 1924, and a member of one committee of the Western Alaska Fair, namely the "Exhibits and Classification Division." His connection to the enabling legislation for government funding of fairs is perhaps why he was listed as "Senator M.D. Snodgrass" on the committee roster.⁶² The Snodgrass papers on file in the University of Alaska Fairbanks archive's show that he retained the records of the formal request and confirmed receipt of the \$1,000 territorial appropriation for the fair, suggesting that he maintained pride in his role as a founder of the Anchorage fair.



Figure 16: Western Alaska Fair in Anchorage. 68-4-572. Agricultural Experiment Station Photograph Collection. Archives, Alaska and Polar Regions Collections, Rasmuson Library, University of Alaska Fairbanks.

The Western Alaska Fair acquired a building in 1926 and had great plans for an ever expanding fair in order to “promote interest in the development of Alaska’s diversified resources and to bring about a better understanding of community problems and the possibilities of territorial upbuilding.”⁶³ Snodgrass may or may not have continued to be involved in the Anchorage fair. He did form a long lasting business and political relationship with one of the directors of the Western Alaska Fair, Anchorage entrepreneur A.A. Shonbeck.

The Great Depression closed the Western Alaska Fair in Anchorage, and one could say indirectly led to its revival in Palmer. Snodgrass was a common booster for both fairs. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt responded to the Great Depression with myriad social programs of the New Deal which included the founding of the agricultural colony in Palmer. The fair, as a by-product of New Deal social engineering, was consistent with Rydell's argument that a conscious awareness of special purpose was orchestrated by the “established political and social order” associated with the creation of expositions and fairs. “America’s depression-era fairs represented a drive to modernize America by making it an ever more perfect realization of an imperial dream world of abundance, consumption, and social hierarchy based on the reproduction of existing power relations premised on categories of race and gender”.⁶⁴

Analysis of Snodgrass's motives shows little evidence of such hegemonic aspirations. He, like many, cherished memories from a happy childhood and wanted to allow others the same while he relived them himself. The first Palmer fair guide Snodgrass prepared was dominated by details meant to attract children and exhibitors to

the fair. Contests for children and prizes for contestants and winning exhibits were described. The minimal cash awards (one or two dollar prizes) did attract adults but were also an enormous incentive for participation for Depression era children. To this day, excited children line up at the fair to collect their ribbons, cash their one to five dollar premium checks and then spend the money on the rides. Capitalism, competition, education and fun become one continuous blur at the fair.

Rydell's premise that Depression-era fairs were held to counter the Depression does not appear to hold true in Alaska. Snodgrass was the key personality in initiating the Alaska State Fair in Palmer in 1936, which was in reality a revival of the defunct Western Alaska Fair. The fair may well have helped people to forget day-to-day concerns about an economic downturn, but Snodgrass had been a promoter of fairs in Alaska well before then.

On the other hand, Rydell's assertion that fair founders tended to belong to the social elite held true in the case of Snodgrass. Rydell's thesis that such elite social leaders used fairs to mold public opinion could be applied to the Alaska State Fair; however, it is clear that Snodgrass intended to promote agriculture through the fair, hardly a controversial idea in a farming community. Furthermore, the small scale farming that Snodgrass promoted was hardly elitist. Snodgrass himself recounted the origins of the Matanuska Valley Agricultural and Industrial Fair Association and its relationship to the demise of the Western Alaska Fair Association: "The Matanuska Valley Fair Association came into existence to fill a void occasioned by the suspension of the Western Alaska Fair Association, of Anchorage going out of business during the

depression of 1929-33, and the stockholders turning over their building to the City of Anchorage, and the Fur Rendevous taking the place of the Fair in the hearts of the people of Alaska. Anchorage was the fast growing fur farming center, gold, railroad, and industrial city of Alaska. *The farmer was overlooked. . .*⁶⁵”

5.10 Organizing the Palmer Fair

The first fair in the Matanuska Valley was intended to be a grass roots community effort. According to Snodgrass’s recollection, the genesis of the fair in May 1935 was a conversation between the manager of the Palmer New Deal Colony, Don Irwin, and Snodgrass about the appropriate location for a fairgrounds.⁶⁶ This was remarkable in that the conversation took place before the colony had even settled into its first temporary tent shelters. It is not as surprising however, that it was the Northland Pioneer Grange No. 1 that became the primary organizational force behind the first Palmer fair. The Palmer fair which is associated with the first year of the New Deal Palmer Colony was actually founded by non-colonists. The colonists were struggling to create their new homes in 1935. They had no time to contemplate the creation of a fair. It was the well established pre-colonist settlers, led by Snodgrass, who took on the project.

The Northland Pioneer Grange preceded the fair and the Colony. Pre-Colony settlers, many of whom were sponsored by the Alaska Railroad after they had been selected by Snodgrass between 1929 and 1933, had decided that they needed a local “farm organization.” After considering a “Farm Bureau,” a “Farmer’s Union” and a “Grange” in 1933, the settlers voted to set up a temporary organization with Ms. Emma King as secretary, to organize a Grange.⁶⁷ The 54 charter members who established the

Northland Pioneer Grange No. 1 on April 26, 1935 were almost all settlers whom Snodgrass had recruited.⁶⁸

The colonists, on the other hand, were destitute farm families from Michigan, Minnesota, and Wisconsin. They were part of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's a grand New Deal experiment. The Great Depression had ruined many farmers. A plan was prepared by the Division of Rehabilitation in the Federal Emergency Relief Administration to create a new farming community in Alaska with federal assistance in order to give some of the struggling farmers in the upper Midwest a new opportunity to resume their farming. About three hundred families settled in the future town of Palmer and its surroundings. Homesteaders and farmers (sometimes referred to as "pioneers" or "settlers" as opposed to the "colonists") had preceded these New Deal colonists and were fairly well established and organized before the first colonists arrived. The two very different groups seemed to interact fairly well, although historian Orlando W. Miller noted some settlers grumbled about the loss of reliable seasonal jobs due to the influx of colonists and supporting transient laborers.⁶⁹ In October of 1935, Snodgrass gave a speech welcoming the colonists and encouraging them to envision a prosperous future: "No one will make a fortune," he said, "but we will live, and live well, and I'd much rather have my home where all have a little, than where a few have it all."⁷⁰

On March 13, 1936, the Northland Pioneer Grange committed itself to launching a three-day fair scheduled for September 1936. On June 12, 1936, Snodgrass and settlers Charles Wilson and C.C. Brix established Grange committees to make the fair a reality.⁷¹

By July 11, a Fair Committee had been selected to plan the fair and a Finance

Committee formed to raise funds and sell stock; on July 27, 1936, a non-profit fair had been incorporated with \$1,200 in capital stock held by 100 shareholders; the shareholders then specifically applied for the \$1,000 in territorial funds for fairs, funds that had been made available by Snodgrass when he had served in the legislature.⁷² This was the second time that Snodgrass was able to use the territorial fair support he had sponsored and he took great personal satisfaction in his ability to make use of his own thirteen-year-old legislation in the creation of the Palmer fair. Once incorporated, the Alaska Agricultural and Industrial Fair Association selected Snodgrass as one of four directors and its first president. To reflect the fair's territory-wide ambitions, regional representatives were named from across Alaska.⁷³

5.11 The First Fair in Palmer

The twelve-page issue of the July 23, 1936 Valley newspaper, the *Matanuska Valley Pioneer* consisted entirely of an article, announcement and exhibitor's guide to the first fair. Snodgrass was listed as a director, president, and manager of the "FIRST ANNUAL FAIR".⁷⁴ Snodgrass, as author of the publication, asserted that "To make this fair a success it will take the co-operation of every Valley resident."⁷⁵ The exhibitor's guide included commentary that briefly touched on the purpose of the fair, which was "entertaining as well as instructing. It is our Harvest Festival and it has become traditional that a general holiday spirit shall prevail . . ."⁷⁶ Somewhat inconsistently, the concluding section of the same guide provided a different justification for the new fair, "In announcing the Matanuska Valley Fair we feel that we are bringing to the people of the Valley and all of Western Alaska an opportunity for expression of our farming and

industrial life. It is our purpose and aim to make the Matanuska Valley Agricultural and Industrial Fair a part of the development of this region . . . This organization is incorporated under the laws of Alaska as a non-profit cooperative association to further Agricultural, fisheries, industrial, mining and educational development in Alaska.”⁷⁷

Snodgrass, ever the advocate of farming, certainly did have a lifelong agenda to promote farming, and the fair was clearly an opportunity to showcase agriculture. The first fair was a modest enterprise with no permanent infrastructure of its own. Agricultural exhibits were placed in what was then the Central School Gymnasium with livestock exhibits outside under tents.⁷⁸

About 3,500 people attended the first fair. The total income was about \$6,000, and most of that was used to pay award premiums and set up funds to acquire a permanent site, as well as to begin construction on two buildings located on land not yet acquired from the Alaska Rural Rehabilitation Corporation (hereinafter ARRC). The fair board named Snodgrass acting manager of the fair and his wife Margaret, office secretary. It was not until 1938 that the fair acquired title to the land where the fair had already constructed its buildings.⁷⁹ Snodgrass ceased to act as manager of the fair in 1938 when the fair board selected Vernon Morman to replace him. Snodgrass, however, remained on the Board of Directors of the fair.⁸⁰ He was the president of the fair until 1940 when he stepped off the board.

Thirty years after the fair had been established, journalist Dolores D. Roguszka not only confirmed Snodgrass's essential role in the founding of the fair, but also the unifying nature of his endeavor in the early years of the colony. “Under the leadership of

M.D. Snodgrass, the *oldtimers and newcomers* (italics added) worked together to put on the first Matanuska Valley Fair.”⁸¹ In fact, from the start of the New Deal Matanuska Colony, Snodgrass had assumed a leadership role in connecting settlers with the colonists to create a sense of a united community.

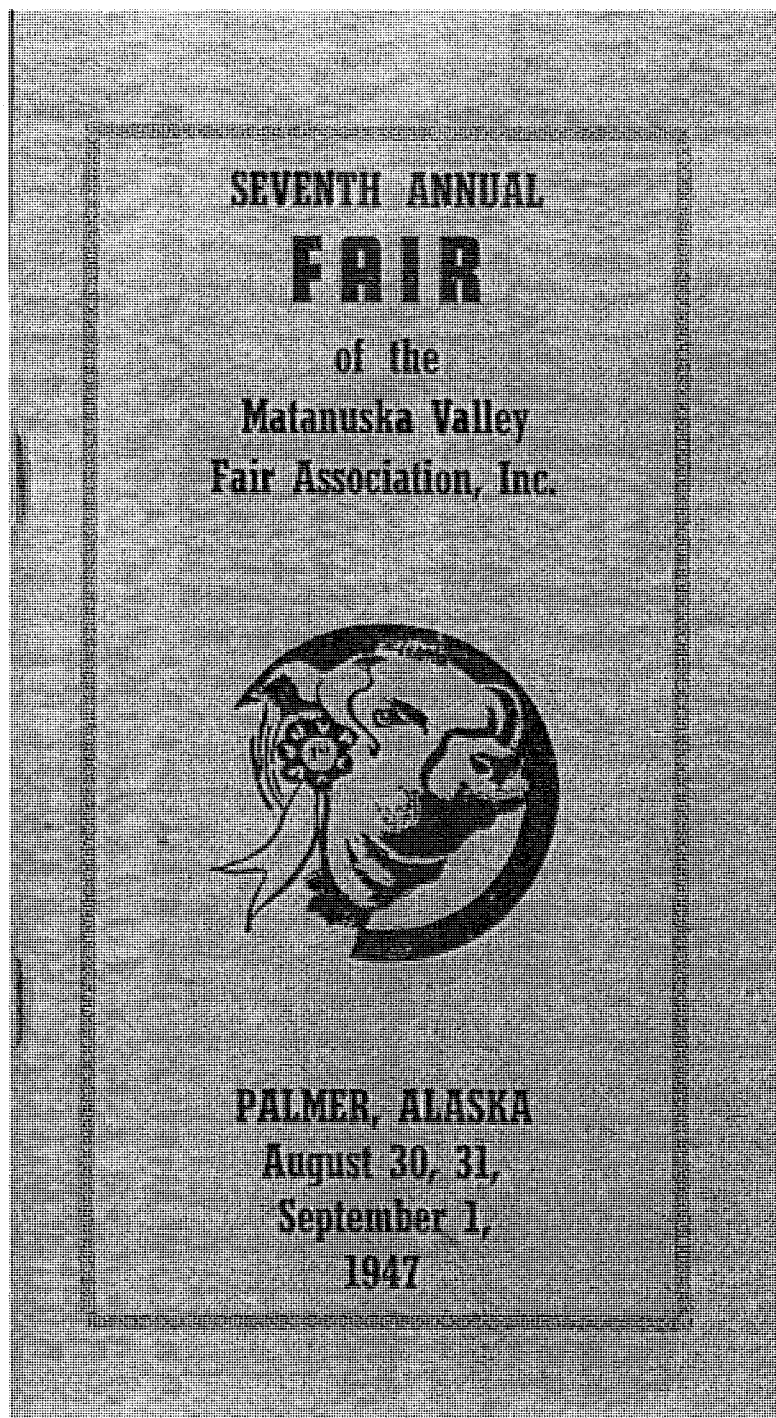


Figure 17: 1947 Matanuska Valley Fair Assn. Exhibitor's Guide cover. Snodgrass papers. Archives, Alaska and Polar Regions Collections, Rasmuson Library, University of Alaska Fairbanks.

MATANUSKA VALLEY FAIR



MILTON D. SNODGRASS



More than forty years of his life have been
devoted to the advancement of Agriculture
in Alaska.

His labor and unfailing devotion to the
Matanuska Valley Fair have contributed large-
ly to its success through the years.

To Mr. Snodgrass, this book is affectionately
dedicated

Figure 18: 1947 Matanuska Valley Fair Assn. Exhibitor's
Guide dedication to M.D. Snodgrass. Snodgrass papers.
Archives, Alaska and Polar Regions Collections, Rasmuson
Library, University of Alaska Fairbanks.

During World War II the fair suspended activities for 5 years.⁸² In 1947, it reconstituted itself and elected a new board. In 1948, Snodgrass was once again elected to the fair board and served until 1951, serving as president in 1949 and as vice-president in 1950. In 1953, the board unanimously elected him as an "honorary board member."⁸³

He served also as the fair's advertising manager several times in the 1950s and 1960s. In 1956, a building on the fairgrounds was named after him. In 1961, he was elected to the fair board for the last time.

Though agriculture was Snodgrass's lifelong principal endeavor, he was an individual with multiple interests. While he was associated with the promotion of agriculture in Alaska, he saw the fair as a vehicle that could fulfill multiple goals. In 1985, former Palmer territorial legislator, V. Louise Kellog, prepared a brief paper titled "The Matanuska Valley Republican Women's Club: A Brief History of the Formative Years, 1945-1960" in which she discussed Snodgrass's efforts to use the fair for political objectives. She noted that the Valley Republican Women obtained their first fair booth, which they still occupied in 2006, from M.D. Snodgrass. She wrote that "M.D. Snodgrass loaned us his ex-campaign booth which was on its way to become Margaret's storage shed."⁸⁴ Snodgrass had maintained a campaign booth on the fair grounds before 1949 in his various unsuccessful efforts to be elected to the territorial legislature.

In her book, *We Shall be Remembered*, historian Evangeline Atwood summed up the recognition of Valley residents for the role of M.D. Snodgrass in the story of the fair when she noted that he was recognized as the "father" of the annual event.⁸⁵ In 1955, according to Matanuska Colony Manager, Don L. Irwin, a campaign was launched to

designate the Matanuska Valley Fair as the official Alaska State Fair,⁸⁶ a curious claim as Alaska was not yet a state in 1955. Nevertheless, the fair eventually adopted the moniker.⁸⁷

The Alaska State Fair in Palmer, like many American fairs, combined many elements of American culture historically associated with fairs and expositions: trade, commerce, entertainment, agriculture, technology, nationalism, education and community beautification. As historian Neil Harris has observed, there has also long been a relationship between major fairs and museums in America, for example the Field Museum in Chicago which was a legacy of the Chicago Exposition. The Alaska State Fair embraced this tradition. By 1955, the Palmer fair leadership had come to recognize the emerging historical significance of the 1935 New Deal Colony that had in part prompted organization of the fair. In 1955, a “sample log building” that had served the colony in 1935 as “headquarters for the civil works program” was moved to the fairgrounds to serve as the new museum to house “artifacts and historical material” related to the Palmer colony.⁸⁸ The fair board appointed T. A. Moyer, president of the Matanuska Valley Fair Association, as curator of the new museum. Eventually, the museum came to form a transportation museum. The number of exhibits exceeded space available and in the 1980s, it was moved to a new location in Wasilla, where it was renamed the Alaska Transportation Museum.

5.12 The Palmer Fair at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century

Writing on the 1893 Chicago Fair, Reid Badger asserted that one of its legacies was to boost architects and advocates of public planning across America. “The White

City not only inspired many people to return to their own homes and towns and make them beautiful, but according to Charles Moore, ‘the impulse to plan American cities for unity, amenity, and beauty was born of the Exposition.’⁸⁹

Architects Frederick Law Olmstead and Daniel H. Burnham who planned the White City would have been very pleased with such an assessment. Historian Elizabeth Stevenson has pointed out that the Chicago fair had allowed “the idea which Olmsted had had more than twenty years before for a park [which] could be used here as the basic design of the fairgrounds.”⁹⁰ Likewise, in the tradition of developing fairs as gardens, hosts for gardens, and opportunities to escape the very crowds associated with fairs, the Palmer fair had developed elaborate, though poorly publicized, garden enclaves within its 300-acre grounds. In approach, the Eckert Garden of the Alaska State Fair is not unlike Frederick Law Olmsted’s later creation of Central Park; which he designed to allow visitors to “be transformed into rural experience, [in] a sanctuary of spiritually uplifting aesthetic pleasure.”⁹¹ The Eckert Garden is open to all fair patrons, yet because it is two hundred yards off the midway, few see it. Those who do venture that far are often surprised to find a manicured enclave of neatly groomed and labeled plants amidst a maturing collection of ornamental trees. The fair also features three smaller gardens closer to main thoroughfares, all of which offer escape from the fair’s hustle and bustle, though to a lesser degree, from the nearly three hundred thousand annual visitors.

With few exceptions, the composition of the board of directors for the Alaska State Fair has consisted almost entirely of Matanuska Valley residents, most living in or near Palmer. Nevertheless, despite Palmer's domination of fair leadership and the

agricultural and historical associations with the New Deal Colony, the fair leadership made deliberate efforts to make it a statewide occasion. According to the official 1964 fair premium booklet, "Unique displays depict the ingenuity of the people of this Frontier Land. . . . Materials from some areas of the state are difficult to obtain because of transportation distances but through the kind efforts of the airlines and railroad these obstacles are being overcome".⁹²

One of the more telling insights into an accurate definition of the Alaska State Fair was provided in the form of a planning document prepared by Albert P. Morrow and Associates, Ltd. of Vancouver, Canada. In December 1981, Albert P. Morrow and Associates had prepared the "Alaska State Fair Inc.: Masterplan and Development Plan". In their discussion of "Image of Future Complex," Morrow recommended expansion of activities and an accompanying name change which would have broadened the mission of the fair as The Alaska State Fair and Exposition Inc."⁹³

Despite Morrow's recommendation, the Alaska State Fair did not change its name. On April 13, 1995, however, the board of directors considered the recommendation in preparation for the special three-week fair of 1998 on the centennial of the Klondike Gold Rush. The motion to change the name officially to "Alaska State Fair and Exposition Inc." was defeated by a vote of 4-2 because the board in part concluded that the change of name might create excessive expectations of change when in reality the fair would largely appear to be very similar to past fairs.⁹⁴

In November of 1996, the fair commissioned an "Alaska State Fair Facility Development Plan" by Sasaki Associates, Inc. of San Francisco. In the **Planning Goals**

and Objectives portion of that study, Sasaki backed off of the grander goals of the 1981

Morrow “Masterplan” and proposed:

1. Continue to operate the annual fair as the primary event to occur on the grounds. The fair should be a unique country-oriented event with a special Alaska flavor. . . .
4. Seek ways to accommodate a major acknowledgment of the statewide 1998 Exposition on the fairgrounds.
5. Clarify and rationalize the site plan by eliminating some uses that are no longer feasible (such as horse racing) and creating areas of usage that reflect current and reasonably achievable activity levels on the grounds. Avoid grandiose development that cannot be realistically achieved within the context of reasonably available resources.⁹⁵

In some ways, the Sasaki analysis was a reality check for the fair board which enabled them to recognize that the long term mission of the fair was the preservation of a balance in maintaining core traditional exhibits and vendors while incrementally improving infrastructure and venues.

For many Alaskans, the primary purpose of the Alaska State Fair is not agriculture or education but rather entertainment. By the year 2007, the Alaska State Fair was surrounded by housing subdivisions. There are very few farms left in the vicinity of Palmer and while the fair continues to attract large numbers of people, the role of farming as a theme has increasingly diminished, and farm exhibits have declined. Like fairs across the country, the modern Alaska State Fair struggles with a desire to maintain fidelity to its agricultural inspiration and roots while at the same time remaining a viable organization. In order to survive a fair needs to understand the interests and expectations of its attending public, which clearly vary and are not easy to anticipate fully.

Rydell conceded that a scientific survey of patrons to the 1939 New York World’s

Fair demonstrated that there is no simple answer as to the impact of a fair: “Here again we ran into the difficulty of getting people to crystallize their thoughts in the midst of so varied and confusing a spectacle.”⁹⁶ The Alaska State Fair appears to satisfy the expectations and interests of a diverse population based on consistently high attendance rates.

5.13 The Alaska State Fair as the Legacy of Milton Snodgrass

One of the more distinctive traits of the Alaska State Fair is the reputation it has developed for giant-vegetable displays, especially, giant cabbages. In 1960, the Alaska State Fair began an annual event billed as “The Giant Cabbage Weigh-off,” which was discontinued and then revived in 1997.⁹⁷ It is a spectator event that attracts a crowd and significant national, as well as state, media attention each year. Thus, long after most commercial farming ceased, agriculture and giant vegetables are perceived as part of the definition of the Matanuska Valley. M.D. Snodgrass would undoubtedly be dismayed by the demise of farming in the valley, but he would still derive some satisfaction from the realization that roughly half of the equivalent of the state population still eagerly attends the seventy-year old event whose establishment is directly attributable to his efforts. Certainly other people were involved in the organization of the Alaska State Fair, however, M.D. was the individual who connected the dots to make it happen when it did and whose diligence certainly contributed to its duration. He had promoted the legislation for territorial assistance to create fairs in 1923. He had been involved as a supporter of the Western Alaska Fair in Anchorage, though it eventually failed. He recognized the opportunity to revive that fair in Palmer and set into motion the process to

do so. He then served on its first board as a director and president. He was there to revive it after its five year hiatus during World War II and it has continued to prosper ever since then.

Snodgrass was born in Indiana, grew up in Kansas and lived, prospered and died in Alaska. In his first two decades in Alaska he clearly gave serious consideration to one day returning to Kansas. As thoughts of returning to Kansas faded, his surroundings in Alaska, that is the experiment station, Palmer, the college and the fair increasingly came to resemble a Kansas set in the mountains of the north. Nearly nine decades after he had seen his first fair in Indiana, Snodgrass was able to relax on a bench at the Alaska State Fair and with thousands of other attendees briefly relive that first fair all over again. He had used the opportunities afforded to him by the Alaskan frontier to recreate a familiar and wonderful event from his childhood but an event that took on a Alaskan flavor with giant vegetables and booths that sold fossilized mammoth tusks.

1. *Anchorage Daily Times*, 7 December, 1967.

2. *Anchorage Daily Times*, 4 September, 1964.

3. The designation "Alaska State Fair" has a somewhat uncertain status. New Deal Colony historian and participant Don L. Irwin asserted that the Alaska "State" legislature was lobbied to designate the Palmer fair and the Alaska State Fair in 1955 - four years before statehood. See: Don L. Irwin, *The Colorful Matanuska Valley* (Don L. Irwin 1968), 111. Eventually, by the 1990's, all major fairs across Alaska claimed the title "State Fair" and incorporated the name into their respective titles. In Palmer, the name simply became "Alaska State Fair, Inc."

4. Ibid.

5. Sally McKinney, *Fairs & Festivals: Illinois, Indiana & Ohio* (Oaks, Pennsylvania: Country Roads Press, 1996), 33-34.

6. Wayne Caldwell Neely, *The Agricultural Fair* (New York: AMS Press, Inc., 1967), 16.
7. Walford, *Fairs, Past and Present: Chapter in the History of Commerce*, 133-142.
8. Monica Davey, "State Fairs, Sagging, Arrive at Crossroads," *New York Times*, Wednesday, 16 August 2006.
9. Neil Harris, *Cultural Excursions: Marketing Appetites and Cultural Tastes in Modern America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 24-25.
10. Burton Benedict, *The Anthropology of World's Fairs: San Francisco's Panama Pacific International Exposition of 1915* (Berkeley: Scholar Press, 1983), 52.
11. Louis S. Warren, *Buffalo Bill's America: William Cody and the Wild West Show* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 419.
12. Reid Badger, *The Great American Fair: The World's Columbian Exposition & American Culture* (Chicago: Nelson Hall, 1979), 107.
13. Ibid., 108-109.
14. Robert W. Rydell, *World of Fairs: The Century-of-Progress Expositions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 214.
15. "Fair Association Premium List in this Issue," *Matanuska Valley Pioneer*, 23 July 1936, 1-2.
16. Louis S. Warren, *Buffalo Bill's America: William Cody and the Wild West Show* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 107.
17. Minutes of the Alaska State Fair Board of Directors, held in boardroom on the fairgrounds, 10 July 1959, Papers of the Alaska State Fair, Inc., Palmer, Alaska.
18. Hubert Howe Bancroft, *The Book of the Fair: An Historical and Descriptive Presentation of the World's Science, Art, and Industry, as Viewed through the Columbian Exposition at Chicago in 1893* (New York: Bounty Books, 1894), 1.
19. *Matanuska Valley Record*, September, 1951.
20. Tricia Olsen, "George 'Doc' Gasser, Alaska Farming's Best Friend." *The Alaska Journal* 13, no. 2 (Spring 1983), 124.
21. Department of Agriculture, *Report of the Alaska Agricultural Experiment Stations, 1916*. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. GPO, 1918), 15.
22. The six listed festivals: Asking Festival, Festival of the Dead, Bladder Festival, Variation of Bladder Festival before spring fishing, and Great Feast to the Dead. Edward William Nelson, *The Eskimo About Bering Strait* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1983), 357-358.
23. Ernest S. Burch, Jr., *The Inupiaq Eskimo Nations of Northwest Alaska* (Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 1998), 35-38, 122 & 214.

24. *Matanuska Valley Pioneer* 23 July, 1936.
25. Larson, *The Devil in the White City: Murder, Magic, and Madness at the Fair that Changed America*, 152.
26. *Matanuska Valley Pioneer* 23 July, 1936.
27. Michael Judge, "Some Pig! A Midwestern Rite of Summer," *Wall Street Journal*, Wednesday, 16 August 2006, D-12. See: Phil Stong *State Fair* (New York: The Century Co., 1932).
28. Dennis B. Downey, *A Season of Renewal: The Columbian Exposition and Victorian America* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 2002), 187.
29. Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1996), 156.
30. *Matanuska Valley Pioneer* 23 July, 1936.
31. Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1961), 343.
32. *Matanuska Valley Record* August 1951.
33. Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams*, 343-344.
34. Badger, *The Great American Fair: The World's Columbian Exposition & American Culture*, 119.
35. Bancroft, *The Book of the Fair: An Historical and Descriptive Presentation of the World's Science, Art, and Industry, as Viewed through the Columbian Exposition at Chicago in 1893*, 82 & 124.
36. Ted C. Hinckley, *Alaskan John G. Brady: Missionary, Businessman, Judge, and Governor 1878-1918* (Miami: Published for Miami University by the Ohio State University Press, 1982), 335-336. Burton Benedict noted the St. Louis Alaska Haida village was "unconsciously symbolizing the potlatch-like quality of the fair. Benedict, *The Anthropology of World's Fairs: San Francisco's Panama Pacific International Exposition of 1915*, 22.
37. Educational Value of the World's Fair," *The Literary Digest*. (13 August 1904), 193.
38. Ibid., 159.
39. J.E. Chilberg, *Alaska-Yukon Magazine*. (1905-1908), 161.
40. Ibid., 185.
41. Ibid.
42. Jeannette Paddock Nichols, *Alaska: A History of its Administration, Exploitation, and Industrial Development During its first half century under the Rule of the United States* (Cleveland: Arthur H. Clark Company, 1924), 330-332.
43. Karal Ann Marling, *Blue Ribbon* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Press, 1990), 152-165.

44. *Frontiersman History*, December 1999.
45. *The First Alaska Electoral Dinner* program, 18 December 1960.
46. *Ibid.*, 355.
47. Elizabeth A. Tower, *Icebound Empire: Industry and Politics on the Last Frontier 1898-1938* (Anchorage: Elizabeth A. Tower, 1996), 162, 167-169.
48. Benedict, *The Anthropology of World's Fairs: San Francisco's Panama Pacific International Exposition of 1915*, 67 & 104.
49. Reid Badger, *The Great American Fair: The World's Columbian Exposition & American Culture* (Chicago: Nelson Hall, 1979), 8.
50. *New York Times*, Wednesday, 16 August 2006. Derek Nelson, *The American State Fair* (St. Paul: Motorbooks International, 2004), 21.
51. Melton A. McLaurin, *North Carolina State Fair: The First 150 Years* (Raleigh: Office of Archives and History, North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, 2003), 5-6.
52. *Ibid.*, 202-203.
53. Rydell, *World of Fairs: The Century-of-Progress Expositions*, 117.
54. McLaurin, *The North Carolina State Fair: The First 150 Years*, 80.
55. Alaska State Fair, "Schedule of Events," (Friday, 1 September 2000).
56. Matanuska Valley Agricultural and Industrial Fair Assn., Inc. Stock certificates.
57. Badger, *The Great American Fair: The World's Columbian Exposition & American Culture.*, 8.
58. *Third Annual Western Alaska Fair Association Inc. Official Premium List*, 1926, 5.
59. *First Annual Fair: Western Alaska Fair Association, Inc. Official Premium List, Rules and Regulations*, 1924.
60. "Historical Data on Alaska State Fair Inc.," Records of the Alaska State Fair, Inc., Palmer, Alaska, 2.
61. *Anchorage Times*, 31 August 1955.
62. Theo Price, Committeeman for the Purpose of Obtaining Territorial Appropriation, Western Alaska Fair Association, Inc., to Honorable Scott C. Bone, Governor of Alaska, (Attachment) 5 August 1924 Snodgrass Papers, Box 1, Folder 1925.
63. *Third Annual Fair Western Alaska Fair Association, Inc. Official Premium List*, 1926, 5.
64. Robert W. Rydell, *World of Fairs: The Century of Progress Expositions* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), 5, 9.

65. *Matanuska Valley Record*, September 1951.
66. Ibid.
67. *Matanuska Valley Record*, August 1951.
68. Ibid.
69. Orlando Miller, *The Frontier in Alaska and the Matanuska Colony* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975), 79.
70. *Matanuska Valley Pioneer*, 10 October 1935.
71. *Matanuska Valley Record*, September 1951.
72. Ibid.
73. Ibid.
74. *Matanuska Valley Pioneer*, 23 July 1936.
75. Ibid.
76. Ibid.
77. Ibid.
78. Don L. Irwin, *The Colorful Matanuska Valley*. (Don L. Irwin, 1968), 111.
79. *Matanuska Valley Record*, September 1951.
80. Ibid.
81. Dolores D. Roguszka, "Alaska State Fair," *Alaska Sportsman* (April 1965): 8.
82. *Matanuska Valley Record*, September 1951.
83. Evangeline Atwood, *We Shall Be Remembered* (Anchorage: Alaska Methodist University Press, 1966), 125.
84. V. Louise Kellog, "The Matanuska Valley Republican Women's Club: A Brief History of the Formative Years, 1945-1960" (presented to the Matanuska Valley Women's Club , 1985), 3.
85. Evangeline Atwood, *We Shall Be Remembered*, 125.
86. Irwin, *The Colorful Matanuska Valley*, 111.
87. The fair was incorporated as the "Alaska State Fair Inc." in September of 1959, after statehood had occurred. Albert Morrow & Associates Ltd., "Alaska State Fair Inc. Masterplan and Development Plan," December, 1981, 25.

88. "Rough Log Building Placed on Fairgrounds as Valley Musuem, " *Anchorage Daily Times*, 31 August, 1955.
89. Reid Badger, *The Great American Fair: The World's Columbian Exposition & American Culture* (Chicago: Nelson Hall, 1979), 115.
90. Elizabeth Stevenson, *Park Maker: A Life of Frederick Law Olmsted* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1977), 397.
91. Lee Hall, *Olmsted's America: An 'Unpractical' Man and His Vision of Civilization* (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1995), 61.
92. *Alaska State Fair Premium Guidebook*, 1964.
93. 5.1.2.6 **Diversification and Multiple-Use Facilities.** ...The concept that this site (the fair) exists only to serve the Annual Fair, if such is the case, should be discarded and a new image fostered in people's minds. Rather, these grounds should be topographically developed into a pleasing park-site which would reflect the latest sociological trends by attempting to provide activities to satisfy people's increased leisure time. . . . 5.1.3 **Image of Future Complex** With the adoption of a future concept for the site it is an excellent time to upgrade and broaden the public image of the new complex. ... One of the actions which can help cement this image of pride is an additional name that will encompass and emphasize the year round activities of the newly planned complex - such a name as "EXPOSITION PARK". And still further, as this site is where the largest Fair in the State is held annually, why could not the name of the organization be officially changed to read:
"THE ALASKA STATE FAIR AND EXPOSITION INC. " See Albert P. Morrow and Associates, Ltd. *Alaska State Fair, Inc.: Masterplan and Development Plan* (December, 1981), 76-78.
94. Minutes of the Alaska State Fair Board of Directors, held in the boardroom on the fairgrounds, 13 April 1995, Papers of the Alaska State Fair, Inc., Palmer, Alaska.
95. Sasaki Associates, Inc. *Alaska State Fair Facility Development Plan* (November 1996), 3.
96. Rydell, *World of Fairs: The Century-of-Progress Expositions*, 155.
97. Leland P. Cade, "Potatoes and Vegetables," *Alaska Sportsman* XXXIV: 10 (October 1965):26-28.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

M.D. Snodgrass:

A Frontier Life of Opportunity Seized

On May 21, 1961 an eighty-five year old Milton Snodgrass returned to the campus of the university he had helped found in 1917. After the presentation of commissions and degrees to the graduating class of 1961 the President of the Board of Regents, Elmer Rasmuson and University President William Ransom Wood called Snodgrass to the rostrum. In recognition of Snodgrass's decades of service to Alaska and the University he was presented with an honorary Doctor of Science degree. The University of Alaska Fairbanks had come to realize what this dissertation attempts to confirm, namely that M.D. Snodgrass was worthy of historical recognition as a great Alaskan.¹

M.D. Snodgrass is important to the history of Alaska for at least two reasons. On a personal level he founded the only institution visited by half of the state population on an annual basis - The Alaska State Fair. In a broader general sense his life is the story of the transition of Alaska's non-Native population from single male adventurers to settled families. Snodgrass lived in Alaska in the sixty years between the two great natural resource booms of the last century. He and his wife arrived nine years after the 1898 Klondike Goldrush, and then died the decade before the Prudhoe Bay oil boom.

In those sixty years Alaska was transformed in many ways. Transportation in 1907 Alaska did not involve airplanes, automobiles, or trains. Travel to and in Alaska was by boat, foot and horse. Communication was slow. There was no real government

or law present in most of Alaska. Basic supplies were ordered in bulk and poor planning could have dire consequences for health and safety. Most of the non-Native population came in search of gold or adventure and had no intention of staying in Alaska for the rest of their lives. Alaska was an adventure not a destination. Margaret and M.D. Snodgrass were no different in that regard when they first arrived. M.D. repeatedly wrote of his plans to return to Kansas or another state until well into the 1920s.

In the first year (1907) in Alaska Snodgrass engaged in exciting adventures and began to prosper in ways he could never have imagined in Kansas. He was thirty-one, and his character was essentially formed. His habits and convictions were well formed. He was a hard worker; he knew the meaning of hard physical farm labor for minimal gain. He had struggled with family and financial burdens and appreciated the value of money and the options it could provide. He had toiled slowly but successfully to obtain a college degree over a twelve year period. He had spent three decades of his life learning to expect little after much effort and to appreciate what he had. When he moved to Alaska he was prepared for life and suddenly he was presented with multiple options.



Figure 19: Margaret and M.D. Snodgrass in Palmer in 1965. Photo provided by Snodgrass family.



Figure 20: Margaret and M.D. Snodgrass with Ms. Matanuska Maid, circa 1965, in Palmer. Photo provided by Snodgrass family.

Snodgrass does not leap out of the pages of Alaska history and demand attention because he was flamboyant, brilliant, original or even lucky. In Kansas he diligently applied himself to learn the value of money, education, public service and family life. Once married he stayed married. His wife was educated; she worked as a librarian in Kansas and a homemaker and school teacher in Alaska. Like most women of her era, she was in the background of his life. The several hundred letters written between M.D. and Margaret Snodgrass which the Snodgrass family donated to the University of Alaska Fairbanks, exhibit a firm and trusting relationship between a couple often separated for months at a time. There is nothing amorous, scandalous or even gossip-inspiring in the letters. Other than expressions of periodic health concerns, there is keen sense of responsibility and planning attached to their correspondence in periods of separation.

From the very start they were stable people arriving in the aftermath of a series of wild gold rushes stretching from the Yukon to Nome and south. The Snodgrasses as a young married couple moving to Kodiak were an anomaly in 1907 Alaska, where most white people were single fortune hunters. Snodgrass even commented years later on the predominantly male composition of passengers aboard the steamship that first carried Margaret and himself north to Alaska. When they first arrived in Kodiak the town came out to see the unusual arrival of newlyweds. Sixty years later a photo of them being honored together in Palmer by a room full of families demonstrated not only an enduring marriage, but a population that had come to resemble families more than the single fortune hunters that dominated the territory in 1907.

In the midst of their Alaska adventure the young Snodgrasses started a family and

moved several times. When they arrived in the Matanuska Valley in 1924 as a family they developed a sense of Alaska as their home. With that came a subtle transformation that involved making their home more comfortable. By virtue of the opportunities Snodgrass had had in Kenai, Kodiak and Fairbanks setting up experiment stations, being involved in the beginnings of a territorial legislature and starting a new college, he had learned how to create institutions. In each instance what had been created was familiar. In the Matanuska Valley Snodgrass employed his talents to organize farmers and eventually a fair. The decision to make Alaska their permanent home appears to have contributed to M.D.'s interest in founding a fair. Had Margaret and M.D. not intended to stay in the Matanuska Valley it seems unlikely that he would have endeavored to establish the annual event that became the Alaska State Fair.

An analysis into the origins and life of the founder of the fair shows a stable man, a practical man and little in his early life to suggest that he would be remarkable. Was he remarkable? Certainly he left a tangible legacy. He left a fair, which he worked hard to re-establish after a two rough starts. The fair is not a unique fair, but it survives and he set its cornerstone. What made him remarkable? The frontier opportunities of life in Alaska provided the setting. Not everyone who moves into a frontier is remarkable. In fact, arguably, most people in the frontier do little to distinguish themselves. Yet Snodgrass did.

Snodgrass was a practical gambler. He was not irresponsible. He did not simply leap at opportunities. He failed more often than he succeeded in major undertakings. His recollections in the later part of his life show he felt nostalgia for his initial arrival in

Alaska. His senses were keenly aware of the natural beauty mixed with the ship chatter about gold and adventure on the slow voyage north. The vivid recollections of: being left alone by a ship with his new bride on an empty beach at midnight in midsummer twilight, driving cattle through rain and grizzly country on Kodiak, or surviving the endless ash clouds of the Katmai eruption all conjure up high drama and adventure. Carving a farm out primeval wilderness and surviving gave this arguably ordinary real man self-confidence.

By virtue of his steady but remuneratively frustrating employment with the federal government, he had a chance to explore Alaska. His arrival coincided with a belated federal interest in providing Alaska with basic institutions: a legislature and a college. Snodgrass did not just watch these things happen. He lent a hand and then he tried to take the lead. He ran for the senate and won. He was appointed to the board of trustees for the new college. He was appointed to the territorial board of education. Frustrated in his position at the experimental farm in Fairbanks he resigned to try his hand at private farming. For a short time in the 1920's it seemed as though he could do anything. Those successes gave him the chance to test his abilities and he learned he was capable of handling responsibility.

On the other hand he over extended himself and learned opportunity seized did not guarantee success. He failed to make enough money to support his family in private farming and had to return to his government job with the experiment stations. His effort to transform his tenure on the board of trustees for the Alaska Agricultural College and School of Mines into the college presidency failed. He withdrew from politics and then

spent almost thirty years attempting to regain a seat in the legislature. Yet, his confidence tempered by the reality of failures did not discourage his basic work ethic or disrupt his family unity. He kept forming and joining organizations usually revolving around agriculture. To that end, he left two enduring legacies. The eventual creation of the Mat-Su Campus of the University of Alaska Anchorage was in part a legacy of his advocacy for an agricultural school in the Matanuska Valley. The establishment of the Alaska State Fair remains his greatest legacy. The fair was meant to boost his lifelong interest in farming. It also represented the real relocation of his own roots from Kansas to Alaska. The fair was founded in Palmer with the help of other settler families also largely from the midwest of the United States. They, like Snodgrass, had come to see Alaska not as a passing adventure, but rather as a destination, their home. If Alaska was to be home it needed to look like home, and a fair was a natural part of their heritage.

Snodgrass had been raised as a farmer. He was college trained in farming science. He came to Alaska following a career path in farming. He retained a life-long enthusiasm for farming, especially hogs and Galloway cattle and agricultural fairs. In Alaska he was a pioneer and fervent advocate for agriculture. His contributions to the study of agriculture in Alaska were methodical and substantial. He worked hard on experimenting with Galloway cattle as an ideal animal for Alaskan farmers because of their hardy nature. He engaged in many experiments with different crops at various locations in Alaska. He was instrumental in recruiting a small (54 families) but successful group of farmers to Alaska for the railroad. He was also a very social man. He was a tireless correspondent with all sorts of people and frequently participated in

political and social gatherings.

He had arrived in Alaska six years before Congress granted the territory an elected legislature. Alaska did not have a college until ten years after arrived. Snodgrass was an active participant in the operation of both institutions. He could have simply been a witness and bystander, but instead he played an active role in the founding of the college and was a candidate in territorial elections. He was surprisingly successful at the beginning. In many ways by trying to gain too much too soon he perhaps retarded his own potential. He went from senator and college trustee seeking to be the first college president to ex-senator, failing farmer and dissident college trustee within two years. The setbacks were significant but never discouraged him from promoting agriculture and higher education in Alaska. His well developed core convictions and domestic stability undoubtedly enabled him to overcome these setbacks and move forward.

The early successes also made it clear to him that he was capable of much more than he had ever dreamed possible in Kansas. He kept on working and striving to be a significant policy maker in Alaska. His dreams of Alaska as an agricultural powerhouse never materialized. However, his efforts resulted in related and lasting legacies like the Alaska State Fair. He did not just dream about things, he tried to realize his dreams.

Snodgrass was a resilient man. He was presented with opportunities and he repeatedly reached out to explore his potential. Early successes gave him the strength to endure numerous subsequent setbacks. In the end, he had earned the respect of the community where he lived and was not troubled by “what might have been.” Sixty years of life in Alaska offered multiple opportunities for accomplishments that would leave

most people satisfied at the end of nine decades of life. The Alaska frontier also gave him the chance to impact the evolution of a new state. Historian Frederick Jackson Turner declared that the American frontier was the “meeting point between savagery and civilization,” a moving boundary which he defined as the “edge of free land.” He went on to conclude that the most important impact of the American frontier was “the promotion of democracy . . . the frontier is productive of individualism.”² Turner asserted that the frontier created a society where, “the most distinctive fact was the freedom of the individual to rise under conditions of social mobility, and whose ambition was the liberty and well-being of the masses.”³ When M.D. Snodgrass was in a position to influence the development of Alaska he worked to replicate a model of middle America. He founded what would become the Alaska State Fair. The fair in Palmer was an embodiment of the ‘liberty and well-being of the masses’- not a bad legacy for a man who understood how to make the most of his opportunities on the northern frontier.



Figure 21: M.D. Snodgrass circa 1966. Photo provided by Snodgrass Family.

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1. University of Alaska Fairbanks, *Baccalaureate Service Program, University of Alaska, Class of 1961*, (Fairbanks: UAF, 1961).
 2. Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1996), 3, 30.
 3. Ibid., 266.

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